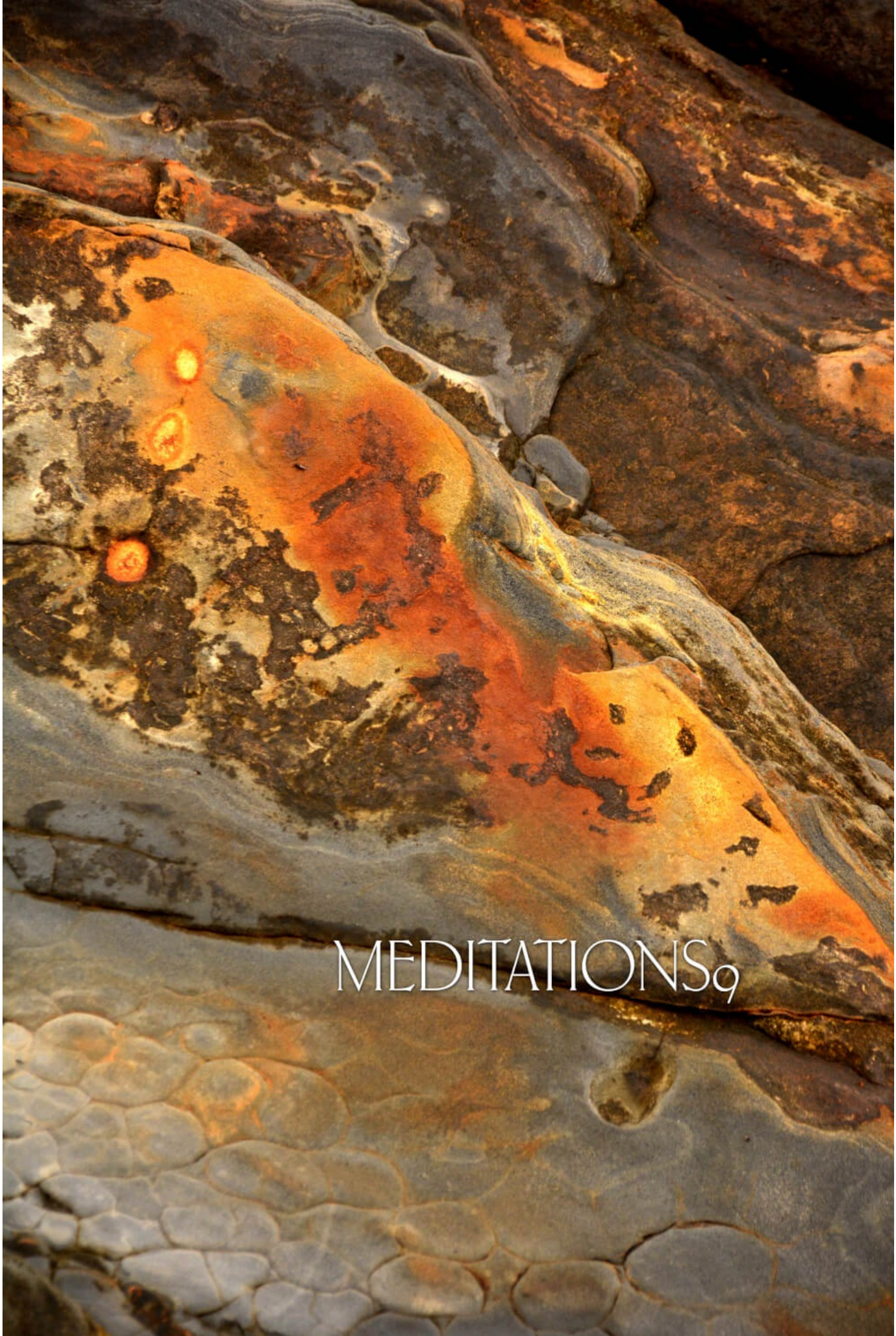
MEDITATIONS9

Meditations 9

Dhamma Talks

by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

questions about this book may be addressed to

Metta Forest Monastery
Valley Center, CA 92082-1409
U.S.A.

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cover

Point Reyes, California

Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon and, later in the evening, a chanting session followed by a group meditation period. The Dhamma talks included in this volume were given during the evening meditation sessions, and in many cases covered issues raised at the interviews—either in the questions asked or lurking behind the questions. Often these issues touched on a variety of topics on a variety of different levels in the practice. This explains the range of topics covered in individual talks.

I have edited the talks with an eye to making them readable while at the same time trying to preserve some of the flavor of the spoken word. In a few instances I have added passages or rearranged the talks to make the treatment of specific topics more coherent and complete, but for the most part I have kept the editing to a minimum. Don't expect polished essays.

The people listening to these talks were familiar with the meditation instructions included in "Method 2" in *Keeping the Breath in Mind* by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo; and my own book, *With Each & Every Breath.* If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Additional Dhamma talks are available at www.dhammatalks.org.

* * *

As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: James Babbitt, Deanna Burkett, Satarupa Das, Judi Faabeng, Amala Ghosh, Melissa Greben, Grace Keiru, Grace Kepler, Andrea Kessler, Virginia Lawrence, Addie Onsanit, Barbara Pereira, Isabella Trauttmansdorff, Emily Walker, and Antony Woods; Vens. Balaggo Bhikkhu and Vijjakaro Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
February, 2019

The Language of the Heart (1)

March 12, 2016

The purpose of learning about the forest tradition, the teachings of the forest ajaans and some of their history, is to bring their lessons inside. The phrase that you'd hear often about the ajaans is that they speak the language of the heart. In other words, they learned the Dhamma through listening, they learned the Dhamma through thinking about it, but then as they actually applied the Dhamma, they learned new lessons in their own hearts. And those are the lessons they wanted to convey. They saw that the purpose of the Buddha's teachings was that they be put into practice until they led to a goal beyond them.

As the Buddha said on the night of his passing away, there were devas who were paying homage to him by sprinkling heavenly scents and heavenly flowers and playing heavenly music. And he told his attendant that that was not the way in which one paid homage to the Tathagata, the Buddha. The true way to pay homage was to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, the Buddha had spent all his many lifetimes to find awakening, and it wasn't for the purpose of heavenly music, heavenly scents, or heavenly flowers. It was for the purpose of finding a skill that could be passed on to others: to solve his own suffering and then to teach that skill to others so that they could solve their own suffering as well. This was the whole point of the Dhamma. And so the ajaans went straight for the point.

And they encouraged others to do that as well. It's interesting that, of the various Buddhist traditions in Thailand, the forest tradition was the one that attracted the most Westerners. They saw that it dealt straight with the problem in their hearts, too. It was simply a matter of translating the language of the heart into their hearts. And so it's good to reflect on how to translate things into your heart right now.

On some levels, it's not that hard. You're focused on your breath. Try to bring your awareness to the breath and see what you can notice about what you're doing that's keeping the mind disturbed. Then clear away that disturbance so that it can settle down. That right there is where you can dig in. If you find that any of the teachings are directly related to what you're experiencing, they can give you encouragement, give you guidance.

When I was newly ordained—it was my second year as a monk—a set of books by Ajaan Maha Boowa came out, which would be translated literally as, *The Dhamma Collection for Getting Ready.* It was a series of Dhamma talks he'd given to a woman who was dying of cancer. And it was an unusual set of circumstances. She didn't have that much background in formal Dhamma training, but she had a very immediate problem

that she earnestly wanted to overcome, which was how to face her own imminent death with skill. This set of circumstances inspired Ajaan Maha Boowa to give some of his best talks, in my opinion. Because on the one hand, they are directly related to *the* main problem, but they also explained a lot, and they are not bound up in too many technical terms. The talks he would give to his monks would often assume that they had a background in the Dhamma textbooks and some background in Dhamma language. But in her case, she didn't have that background, so he started speaking straight from the heart, from his own experience.

In my particular case, I remember reading a passage where he talked about how thoughts begin to form in the mind with a little bit of a stirring, a perception is slapped onto them, and then they turn into full-blown thoughts. I had noticed that in my own meditation; I had never seen it explained anywhere. And so my immediate reaction was, "Finally, here's somebody speaking directly to that problem." And so it's good, as you go through the teachings of the forest tradition, to find which teachings speak directly to your problem. And if you have some background in where the ajaans are coming from, it helps to translate some of their terms, so that you find that something which at first glance might not seem to be relevant actually *is* relevant to what's going on inside —very relevant.

This problem of communication is a big one in passing on the teachings. After all, suffering is something that we each feel for ourselves. It's not part of our awareness that we share with anyone else. It's like your sense of the color red. You can't take that and compare it to other people's sense of red. We don't really know how other people see red. We agree that a particular color we can point to is red, but what red looks like to other people, we don't know. Your own pain is something even more private. It's something that you feel exclusively yourself; no one else can feel your pain for you. But as it turns out, the solution to the problem of how you relate to the pain so that you don't suffer: That solution lies within your awareness as well—the inner area of awareness, the private area of awareness. And so communication across that barrier can often be difficult because we let in some words and keep others out. If our frame of reference doesn't allow for something, it just goes right past.

Years back, I was giving a Dhamma talk at CIMC—this was very early on in my time back in the States. At that time, I had a set of standard Dhamma talks I'd give in places where I wasn't familiar with the people. And as I was walking into the room, I realized that it was my second or third year of giving a Dhamma talk there, and I couldn't remember which talk of my standard set I had given the previous year. I was wondering what would happen if I gave the same talk again—what would people think? But as I was walking into the room, the woman who had been in charge of the tape recorder the previous year happened to be standing next to me. She turned to me and said, "You know, what you said last year meant so much to me." I was all ears to hear what I had said last year, but she then said something I knew that I would never have

said. I then realized that I could say anything that night, and no one would know I was repeating myself.

This reflects the fact that what we hear is often confined to what we allow ourselves to hear. Part of that allowance has to do with how much we trust the speaker, and part with how satisfied we are with the way we already see things.

This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha focused on the problem of suffering as the point of communication. Only when we admit to ourselves that we're suffering, are we really open to listening to other people. As the Buddha himself said, there are two reactions to suffering. One is bewilderment: Why is this happening? The second is: Is there anyone out there who knows a way or two to put an end to this suffering? That's when we're interested in listening to other people—when there's suffering—in hopes that maybe they can help.

So you look at yourself: What are you willing to take in from the teachings of the forest masters? To what extent do you feel that you are responsible for your own suffering and you'd like some help? That's what it comes down to. To what extent do you trust them? My own experience with them is that they are eminently trustworthy. When you read Ajaan Maha Boowa's account of how he tested his state of mind again and again, to make sure that a particular defilement, when it was gone, was really gone, you see the earnestness with which they practice. So try to bring the same earnestness to your own practice.

In a passage at the very end of Ajaan Maha Boowa's biography of Ajaan Mun, where he recounts Ajaan Mun's final sermon, there's a part where he uses the analogy of a warrior going into battle. He describes how the different aspects of the practice can correspond to the food for the warrior and the warrior's weapon. Discernment, he said, is the weapon. As I was reading the passage for the first time, I kept thinking, "Well, who's the warrior?" And he finally got to the conclusion: The warrior, he said, is your determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.

In other words, you've allowed your greed, aversion, and delusion to drive you for who knows how long. They get you to do things that are not in your own interest. And in Ajaan Lee's image, they get you to do these things and then, when the police come to catch you, they run away. You're the one left to deal with the consequences of your actions. They're probably laughing at how gullible you are. So how much longer do you want to put up with that? If you've decided you've had enough, okay, here are the teachings. These are the teachings from the hearts of the ajaans, from the hearts of the people who have practiced earnestly, and they're offered freely for your assistance, for your aid.

Now, of course there has to be an element of translation to go through, even when the teachings are there in English. Every time there's a communication from one person to another, you have to translate it into your own heart, into your own issues. When

Ajaan Lee is talking about the breath, what does it correspond to in *your* experience? When Ajaan Fuang noticed that I was having trouble getting my head around the concept of breath energy in the body the first time I was there—the concept appealed to me, but I wasn't quite sure how to handle it—he said that it refers to the sense of feeling already there throughout the body, it's just a matter of learning to recognize that feeling as breath energy. Then you just start working with what you already feel, seeing it as a type of breath. So take that concept and see how it helps you to get the mind to settle down.

The question that was waiting for me tonight was: To what extent do people consciously decide they're going to take on a jhana practice, and to what extent does it naturally come? The answer is "both," in the sense that when you're doing a mindfulness practice, you're not thinking "jhana," but jhana is the aim of mindfulness—to finally get mindfulness really solid and steady, like the flame of an oil lamp. As they say in the texts, the establishings of mindfulness *(satipatthana)* are the themes of right concentration. In other words, when mindfulness is really established and solid, you're going to get the mind into jhana. Mindfulness gives you a frame of reference to look at what's happening in the mind, to recognize certain states of mind as either skillful or unskillful. And when you know what the state of mind is, then you know—if you've read anything else in the Dhamma—how you should behave toward it: which are the things to abandon, which are the things to develop, which are the things to comprehend, and what techniques you can use to go about doing that. As you abandon things that are unskillful, comprehend whatever suffering you're creating for yourself, and develop the path, the mind will naturally settle down. In getting far away from sensual thoughts, far away from unskillful thoughts, the mind has the tendency to want to settle down and find some peace. And there's your jhana, regardless of whether you thought of it or not.

Years back, there was a lay Dhamma teacher who was going to spend some time in the Forest Refuge and do some work on the breath. So he asked me if he could have some interviews over the phone. One of his first conditions was, "Don't try to get me to do jhana, okay?" I said, "Okay." But as he started working with the breath, he found himself getting into the stages of jhana in spite of himself. So it's not necessary that you think of jhana. In fact, jhana is not the topic of jhana; the breath is the topic. Not one of the factors of jhana is the thought, "jhana." You direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath, you evaluate the relationship of your mind to the breath, and as you get more and more interested in that one issue, the mind gathers around one place. Then the sense of pleasure, the sense of rapture, will follow.

Now, when you hear these words, what do they mean? Look into your own experience and try to gain a sense of how they're talking about things happening in your mind. Some of these sensations you're already quite familiar with. I remember one time, when I got into a state of concentration, that there was a certain feeling in my

mouth. And I said to myself, "I haven't had that feeling in my mouth since I was a child"—a certain relaxation that I remembered from childhood and that for some reason I had forgotten during all those years of being a tense teenager and a tense young adult. In many cases, concentration is a matter of settling into areas that you'll find familiar once you get there, and say, "Oh, this is what they're talking about." This is how you translate the language of *their* hearts into the language of *your* heart.

So what they're talking about is not all that foreign. They're talking about their experience as experienced from within. To benefit from what they're saying, you bring it into your experience as you experience it from within. And in cases where you find that their vocabulary is helpful, okay, apply it; where their perceptions are helpful, you apply them. It's like learning how to be a professional taster. Part of the training they have for professional tasters is not only for developing a sensitive palate, but also for giving you a vocabulary to describe smells and tastes. The larger your vocabulary, the more distinctions you can make, and the more subtleties you can actually detect. It's like that *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon where Calvin is saying, "Ah! The smell of fall! It's so indescribable." And Hobbes says, "No, I think it's describable. It's a snorky, bramblish smell." And Calvin comments, "I should have realized that tigers, with a more sensitive nose, would have a bigger vocabulary to describe smells." In other words, their sensitivity is what gave them their vocabulary.

But sometimes it works the other way around: The more extensive your vocabulary for describing your inner experience, the more you begin to detect things in your own experience that you had glommed together—things you hadn't really paid attention to. As in the book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, where the art teacher talks about teaching art students how to do very realistic drawings of people's faces by telling the students not to look at the eyes or the nose or the mouth, but to look at the spaces *between* the nose and the mouth, the space *between* the nose and the eyes, the space *between* the eye and the eyebrow, and depict those: She found that people who ordinarily had trouble drawing could actually do really good drawings because they were looking at something they had never really paid attention to before, so they had no preconceived notions about how the space between your eye and eyebrow should look. It's by calling attention to these things that they began to notice what was already there.

So a lot of this language of the heart is trying to point your attention to things that have always been there but you just didn't notice. As I said earlier, your motivation for listening and absorbing is that you see that you're suffering and would like to find a way out. So keep that motivation in mind, and keep that willingness to learn in mind, so that when you take in the language of the heart and it becomes the language of *your* heart, it doesn't stop with just the words—it gets to the things that the words are pointing to, their whole purpose.

There's that word *attha* in Pali—which is not the same as *atta,* which means self. This is *attha*, with an *h.* It means "goal," but it also means "meaning." The two words,

dhamma and *attha,* are paired very often in Thai Buddhism, and they're sometimes paired in the Pali Canon. And it's interesting that "meaning" and "goal" and "profit"—which is another meaning of *attha*—all come down to the same word. In other words, the meaning of the Dhamma—i.e., the *attha* of the Dhamma—is also its goal. The words point you to get to that goal. When you reach the experience of the goal, that's when you can say that you really understand them. That's when you've mastered the language of the heart.

The Language of the Heart (2)

August 29, 2018

A couple of years after Ajaan Fuang passed away, some people from Bangkok came to the monastery and wanted to hear about miracles. What miracles had we seen since Ajaan Fuang passed away? What miracles had I seen while he was alive? There had been quite a few things about Ajaan Fuang that were uncanny. But for this group of people—they were from the Ministry of Education—I decided to say something more important, which was that I thought it was miraculous that during all those years I was with him, even though I was a Westerner and he was a Thai, he always treated me as a human being, and our communication was always on a human level. In other words, our differences in culture didn't seem to get in the way. He had obvious compassion for me as a fellow human being.

Now, of course, I had my problems adjusting to the culture over there—and it may have been because I was learning the Dhamma in a second language—but there was sometimes a feeling at the very beginning that it was almost like make-believe: "Okay, we'll take this on as a game." I didn't consciously think of things in quite those terms at the time, but I remember one day in particular when it really hit me that that was what I had been doing. I was going through the six elements, which are a fairly foreign-sounding teaching, and I suddenly realized, "These words are talking about things that I'm directly experiencing." The language of the Dhamma pointed directly at my experience of my own body, my experience of my own mind. Something frozen in my heart suddenly melted. And only when I was willing to take on the teachings at that level did I find that I benefitted the most.

And the fact that Ajaan Fuang was able to communicate on a level that wasn't just Thai-to-Westerner was because he was living in line with what you might call the customs of the noble ones. This was a teaching Ajaan Suwat used to like to talk about quite a lot: that we're here not to practice in line with Western customs or Thai customs or anybody's customs, except for the customs of the noble ones, because the noble ones are the ones who've found how to put an end to suffering. They've understood their minds and hearts in a way that allows them to bring suffering to an end.

What this means is that we have to learn how to understand our minds and hearts in that way, too. We can't say, "Well, now that the Dhamma's come here, I want Dhamma in line with my language or with my way of seeing things." That's putting up a barrier. After all, no matter what post-modernists may say, the Buddha was not trying to exert power over people. He was giving them a way of analyzing their minds so that they could understand, "This is where suffering comes from. This is why it happens. This is

how I can put an end to it." And part of putting an end to it requires that you understand it in those terms.

The four noble truths, the factors of dependent co-arising: These teachings may seem foreign at first, but that's an indication of how alienated we are from our own minds or from understanding how our minds work. These teachings provide precisely the tools that are useful for taking those processes apart: understanding how we create suffering for ourselves and how we don't have to. So the language here is not just a relic of some attempt at power. It's an attempt to show kindness. And we're kind to ourselves when we learn how to adopt the language and realize that these terms are speaking directly to us. It may take some time to sit with them in practice until you see that "Oh yeah, it's talking about this thing that I'm directly experiencing inside." But that's time well spent.

You are submitting yourself to the Dhamma, but the Dhamma's not there to exert power over you. The Dhamma's there to help you find the way to end your own suffering. After all, your own suffering is probably the most intimate problem you experience. And the Dhamma's talking directly about intimate aspects of the mind, intimate aspects of the heart.

There were times when I'd describe a meditation experience to Ajaan Fuang and he'd explain it to me in different terms. Sometimes I'd be resistant. I'd say to myself, "Well, no, it actually seems *this* way to me." I didn't actually say it to him, but I thought it. Only after I got to know my mind better did I realize that he was describing it precisely the way it was happening. It was because of my own blindness that I didn't see it that way to begin with.

So try to open your heart to the lessons of the Dhamma, and particularly to the lessons of the Dhamma you don't want to hear. This includes the lesson of how much effort has to go into the practice. Our modern belief is that we've learned how to do things in a much more streamlined and efficient way than they did in the past, and we often carry that attitude into the Dhamma, thinking that people in the past didn't know how quickly or efficiently these things could be done. But the Buddha was the sort of person who, if there were an easier path to the end of suffering, would have taught it.

But the only path that works is a path that requires right effort, such as the four bases of success, three of which now are viewed with disdain in Western Buddhist circles: desire, persistence or "efforting," and using your powers of judgment. The Buddha said that these are necessary for success in the practice. The only one of the bases of success that we still tend to follow is in intentness: that you have to pay attention. But then they say, "Well, there's no such thing as success or not success. Everybody's already awakened." Well, no, we're not. If we were already awakened, we wouldn't be suffering.

And the Dhamma's not a Dhamma of make-believe. The Buddha didn't just sit

around and think up ideas of what would be a cool vocabulary to pass on. He put his life on the line and he tried all kinds of approaches before he found the approach that worked. Part of that approach is right view, which means that you take on the opinions of the noble ones about how suffering should be understood. They don't expect you to know for yourself just yet, which is why it's called right view rather than right knowledge. It's an opinion you adopt until it gives its results. That's when it becomes right knowledge.

So you're taking on the culture of the noble ones, the values around wanting to abandon unskillful actions and wanting to develop skillful ones in their place. And we take on their language—which the ajaans often call the language of the heart—for analyzing what is skillful, what's not. How do things get developed? How do things get abandoned? These tools are all there for our own good, for our own happiness. It's up to us to open ourselves up so that those tools can really do their work. And it's then that we realize how really well designed they are.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says it's like a recipe for medicine. If you've never made the medicine or used it to treat a disease, the recipe doesn't have much value for you. It's something that gets stashed away and forgotten in a pile of papers. But if you've ever realized, "Okay, I've got this disease, this is the medicine I need, I make the medicine, and it works," then you treat that piece of paper with a lot of respect. And it's the same with the practice: You take the Dhamma and you put it into practice. You really apply the Buddha's analysis to your mind. He said that this is why you're suffering. You say, "Okay, I'll admit that. I'll take that on and see what happens when I can understand my mind using his vocabulary, using his perspective." When you see how it really works, that's when you see why we bow down to the Buddha so much around here. That's the appropriate response. He took the Dhamma out of his heart, and it's meant to be taken into our hearts. That's when we appreciate how good it is—so that when we chant, "The Dhamma of the Blessed One is well-taught, well-expounded," we see how true that really is.

No One in Charge

January 29, 2016

To maintain its health, the mind needs its own place to rest: not just resting in sleep, resting with alertness, awareness. That kind of place requires several skills. One is the skill of just being able to be quiet. Another is the skill of being able to cut away your interest in things outside. Some people find this to be the scary part of the meditation. We've been taught to believe that our goodness consists of our being concerned about things outside, and here we are telling ourselves that, for the time being, those things don't matter. As they say in the forest tradition, the sky could be falling but we're going to stay right here and not let it get to us, because we need a part of the mind that things don't get to. That's our sanity. That's our safety.

So learn how to find a spot inside where you're at ease with the breath and learn how to protect it. Learn how to catch your thoughts as they go running out, or at the very least catch your tendency to follow them. They can go, but you don't have to go with them. You want a spot where you can see them go, but you're not following along. You're not getting into them.

For many of us, it's like a car driving up. The driver stops and says, "Hey! Come on in!" and you jump in the car and you ride off. You very rarely ask, "Who's driving?" "Where are we going?" The car looks shiny, so you think, "Let's go," and you jump right in. But now you want to be in a position where the thoughts may come but you don't get into them. And that's not simply a matter of making yourself dull to the world or dull to your thoughts. In fact, you have to be very alert to them, very quick to their nuances to see the various ways in which they might try to catch you, or the ways in which you allow yourself to be caught.

Sometimes, when superficial thoughts don't get you, the ones that seem more important will: What are you doing with your life? Why are you sitting here not helping other people? Why aren't you getting on with the big scheme of things? Remind yourself that, as the Buddha said, there really is no big scheme of things. Samsara is just a wandering-on, and it's rather aimless. In the words of Hölderlin, the German poet, it's "diverging lines." The lines of our lives come together and then drift apart. That may sound scary, but it's actually very liberating. If there were a plan to the universe, we'd have to figure it out so that we could follow it. Yet obviously it's not written down in clear terms anywhere in nature, so we're left with a game of guessing.

As the Buddha said, the wandering-on just wanders, but you can give a direction to your life. You're not obliged to fit into anyone else's pattern for how your life should go. You get to make the choice. Now, some people take that as a license for all kinds of

misbehavior, but as the Buddha said, there is a pattern to the way actions give their results that doesn't let you simply get away with things. This pattern is built into the nature of action. If you act on motivations based on greed, aversion, or delusion, there's going to be suffering. If you act on motivations based on renunciation, non-ill will, or harmlessness, it pulls you out of suffering. So it's not the case that, because there's no purpose to things, there's no pattern at all. You're not totally free to shape things as you like and always get the results you want. But you can master the pattern so that your actions lead to a good purpose.

The question then becomes: What kind of happiness do you want out of this pattern? Where will you find satisfaction? Where will you find fulfillment?

As the Buddha said, fulfillment comes from letting go. Several of the ajaans have said that the practice is basically one thing clear through. It starts with generosity and it ends with total letting go. But you also have to work on developing—in other words, developing the good qualities that will allow you to let go with skill, because if you have nothing at all in the mind, then when you let go of things, you're a pauper. There's nothing left that you can use. But if you develop good qualities in the mind, then the things that you don't need anymore you can put aside, but you're not poor. You'll still have those good qualities. In other words, you're not deprived of them when you let them go. They're still there for you to use.

It's actually by finding this strong space inside us—developing it and maintaining it—that we put ourselves in a better position to be giving to ourselves and giving to the world. So this is a pursuit of happiness that's not irresponsible. In fact, it's the most responsible way you can find happiness. It allows you to put aside a lot of questions that really don't have any clear answers—such as the question, "Who am I?" I was reading a book a while back saying that this is the great question of all great religions: "Who am I?" Well, they're obviously not counting what the Buddha taught as a great religion, because as far as he was concerned, that question simply gets you tied up in a fetter of views. The important question is not "Who am I?" but "What should I do—and what will be the results?" That's a question that can be answered—and answered in ways that really do make a difference in your life and can get you out of the confines of the world entirely.

But to get out of the world requires that we first give something to it, and each of us will have to decide how and what we want to give. Some people say that if you try to get out of this process of samsara, you're selfish—and that it's bad for the world if people think they can get out. But actually it's very good for the world, because you don't get out by being selfish. You don't take anything of the world with you; you have to leave everything worldly behind. Look at the Buddha. He created a lot of goodness and then he left it behind. That was how he was able to enter total nibbana. We don't get to haul anything along with us into nibbana. We create goodness to leave it behind as our gift. And the leaving behind, when it's done from a position of strength, becomes a gift to

ourselves as well. Everyone benefits.

So when the Buddha says that the world is aimless, it's actually a liberating thought. It's not meant to be depressing. It's meant to tell you that you can choose your aims. You've got the choice of how you're going to look for happiness, with the realization that, in line with the principle of kamma, the quality of your intentions, the quality of your decisions, will determine whether you actually find happiness or not, and what kind of happiness it'll be: a happiness that just gets thrown away or a happiness that stays with you as something infallibly there.

That opens immense possibilities. If you were defined, say, by your body, by your position in society, or by something else that someone else had imposed on you, there would be huge limitations on what you could do. But the Buddha never defines people by what they are. He says, "This is what a human being can *do.*" And one of the things a human being can do is find true happiness. And human beings, in the process, can be generous, they can be virtuous, they can find true well-being inside their minds, and they don't have to wait for that well-being until after they die. It's right here. The possibility is right here. So be careful not to limit your notion of what's possible in your human life.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that if you want to get the most benefit out of a Dhamma talk, 1) you don't have contempt for the talk, 2) you don't have contempt for the speaker, and then, what's really interesting, 3) you don't have contempt for yourself. In other words, you don't belittle your potentials or your capabilities.

Think of what this opens up for you. There's no one out there making a plan for you. As the chant we recited just now said, "There's no one in charge." Or as Ajaan Fuang used to say, "When you were born, nobody hired you to be born, so there's no one who can tell you what you have to do with your life. You're nobody's servant." Now, the principle of kamma creates a pattern of responsibility that you can't ignore. So taking that into consideration, what do you want out of life? The choice is yours. And here are the tools, the tools of the meditation: developing tranquility, developing insight. These will help you choose well.

Take Good Aim

January 9, 2016

The Buddha compares the discernment that comes from meditation to the skills of being a good archer. You're able to shoot long distances, fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and pierce great masses. In other words, you see the long-term results of what you're doing, or of different possible courses of action, so that you can choose which is going to be the best in the long term. That's like shooting great distances. Firing accurate shots in rapid succession means being very clear about what's going on in the mind, moment to moment, and especially clear about when suffering is arising there, how it's arising, and how it can be brought to an end. Because the mind can change so quickly, you want to be able to see it very quickly. Piercing great masses means piercing the mass of ignorance.

Now, in general, to be a good archer, you have to have a really good, concentrated mind. For your aim to be good, you have to be able to stare at the target for long periods of time without wavering, without blinking. It's similar to the quality of mind that makes a good potter. I was watching a potter one time in Thailand as he made a pot on a wheel. I said to him, "You must have good concentration." He said, "Your mind has to be constant." In other words, you can't waver.

This is one of the reasons why we're working on concentration—to develop that steady, constant, unwavering quality of focus that enables our discernment to do its work. And what is the work of discernment? To understand our cravings. As we chanted just now, the mind is usually a slave to craving. We're slaves to cravings because we don't understand them. We haven't pierced them. We haven't watched them quickly or carefully as they change. So, often, we misunderstand our own cravings.

Sometimes we become a person we don't even recognize. A certain craving takes over and, as the Buddha says, craving leads to becoming. And what is becoming? It's the act of creating an identity in a certain world of experience or taking on an identity based on your desires. The identity here is either the "you" who's going to enjoy the results of the desire, or the "you" who's going to be able to produce those results. This is why the Buddha has us ask every day, "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" Whatever you're becoming, it grows out of your desires and your cravings. And if you don't know them, then even what "you are" flies out of your control.

Sometimes people come, asking, "Who am I?" That's the big spiritual question, we're told, or "What's the purpose of life? What's the meaning of life?" And the Buddhist answer is, basically, you are what you define yourself to be, and your purpose

in life is what you decide it's going to be. There's no overarching purpose to the universe. Remember the Buddha's vision of the universe—it just keeps going through many cycles, around and around and around. It goes nowhere. And the beings within the universe go around and around, too. They wander here and there, but keep coming back and then going on and keep coming back again. If they don't get out, they don't go anywhere, either. And as for what you are, that keeps changing in line with your desires.

Now, some people find this scary, but the Buddha saw it as an opportunity. You can define your desires in such a way that you give your own meaning to your life, a meaning that's good. If there were an overall purpose to the universe, you'd have to serve that purpose regardless of what that purpose meant in terms of your health, well-being, and happiness. The question of putting an end to your suffering would have to be put off to the side, because you'd have to serve some other purpose. But with the universe being meaningless, you can give meaning to your life by saying, "I'm going to put an end to suffering." Then you can define yourself around that. Make that your desire, because it's a noble desire.

You'll find, of course, that some members of the committee of the mind have lots of other desires as well, most of which are based on very strange ideas of what's possible in the world. Now, you can't simply make up your mind about the way things are going to be. You can't make up your mind, say, that you're going to be a sex addict and have perfect happiness, too. The universe doesn't work that way. Your mind doesn't work that way. This is why we have the teachings on the principles of action—to remind ourselves, "This is how things work." If you act on this kind of desire or this kind of motivation, it's going to have these kinds of results. If you have that kind of intention and act on it, it'll have those kinds of results. The Buddha lays it all out. And then says it's up to us: Which do you want to choose?

The other thing he lays out is what's possible. In the example of his life, he shows that it is possible to put an end to suffering, and you can do it in a way that doesn't harm anyone else. In fact, when you look at his life, you can see that he created a lot of good for the world. He set out the Dhamma to show people how they can put an end to their own suffering. He created a monastic order so that this skill could be taught from generation to generation as a living apprenticeship. He did a lot of work to show us: This is what human beings can do.

So it's good that we keep that in mind, because the rest of the world wants to close off a lot of options—and not only the world outside of the Dhamma, but also the world of what passes for Buddhism here in the West. A lot of the teachers are trying to close off the options that the Buddha opened up. Fortunately, you can't close them. For people who are looking for them, they're still there.

And you have the opportunity to define yourself. What are you becoming right now? When you make up your mind that you want to put an end to suffering, you have to deal with the other "yous" in there that are created around different desires. This is why

we have to fire shots in rapid succession and be accurate, because our cravings are very subtle and quick.

All too often you may think you desire one thing, or have a craving for one thing, but then when you get it, you realize that's not what you wanted. If you're lusting for a particular person, say, you think that the person is the object of your desire. But if you get the person, things often don't go the way you thought they would. "This is not the person I thought I was getting. This is not the story I was imagining." So you have to look back again. What was it that you were actually desiring? What was your craving really aimed at? These things shift very quickly—the narrative you had, the fantasies you had. What exactly got you interested? What was the hook? A perception? A feeling? How did they get associated with that person?

The same with anger: You're angry because things are a certain way and you want them to change. Well, suppose you actually got them to change. You might find that that doesn't really satisfy you. There was something else that you wanted. And so, here you are, being defined by your desires and you don't even know what your desires are aimed at or where they actually lead.

So we get the mind really quiet to see these shifts in the desire. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this. He contemplated the foulness of the body as a way of overcoming lust. He got so that he was really quick at it. But then he realized that the problem wasn't with the object. There was something in his mind that liked the perception of beauty. The problem wasn't the body of this person or that person out there. It was his being hooked on the perception of beauty, something totally internal. Think about this for a minute. We create lots of havoc, not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of others, simply because we don't even know what our desires are. We think we want something and we find out, "Well, that's not what I want," and we want to throw it away. We barge through life like this, creating huge messes.

So getting to know your own desires and gaining some control over them requires sitting down very quietly with a mind that's steady and solid, and looking at what you really want in life. You've got the choice. Choose your desires well so that you create good becomings. Ultimately, of course, as the Buddha said, the best thing to do is to go beyond becoming this person or becoming that person. With arahants, as he said, you can't define them because people define themselves around their desires and their attachments, whereas someone who has no desires, no attachments—because they've found true happiness—can't be defined. As far as they're concerned, the question of who they are is a non-question. The question of what happiness can be found in the context of worlds is a non-question. And as for purpose in life, they've achieved that purpose. They have no further purposes for their own sake. Their only remaining purposes center on helping others in *their* quest for their highest purpose.

We're not there yet. We're still on the path, but the good news is that we get to choose our purpose. The bad news is we get to choose our purpose. In other words, if

we're really sloppy in our choices: As they say, be careful what you want because you might get it. So you want to train yourself, both in terms of the concentration that sees things steadily, and the discernment that shoots great distances: seeing clearly that "if I choose this course of action, this is where it's really going to go." This is the discernment that helps to get you past the usual muddled perceptions where you think, "Well, I think I might want this person," or, "I think I want this situation," and you try to get it and it doesn't turn out to be what you thought it was. Or it *was* what you thought it was, but you really had other ideas in mind. You were actually fixated on something else.

In this way, the ability to fire shots in rapid succession actually connects with that ability to shoot great distances, and to pierce great masses. You break through your ignorance so that you see the long-term results of quick changes in the mind.

And you clean up your own life. You give it a good direction and you stop making a mess of other people's lives. This is why this is a good path. It's good—not only for you, but also for the people around you—that you're following this path. So try to take advantage of the freedom you have. You get to define yourself. You get to define the purpose of your life. Keep the Buddha's options in mind as to what the possibilities are and make the best choices you can.

The End of the World

November 30, 2016

As Ratthapala said in his Dhamma summaries, “The world is swept away.” We have to make sure that we don’t get swept away with it.

The problem, of course, is in that last of the Dhamma summaries: “The world is a slave to craving.” In other words, *we’re* slaves to craving, which is why we keep going back for these things that get swept, swept, swept away.

Now, the fortunate thing is that we’re not trapped here. We don’t have to stay here. In fact, the whole purpose of the teaching is to get out.

The idea that Buddhism is here to create a perfect world where everybody is kind and generous, has nothing to do with what the Buddha actually taught. The whole idea of a secular Buddhism, where the emphasis is on our living the good life here in this world, is an oxymoron. The Buddha was aiming at something above the world. *Lokuttara,* the word we translate as “transcendent,” actually means, “above the world.” You’ve got to make your mind above the world.

Otherwise, you get crushed—think of all those mountains moving in, in the simile the Buddha taught to King Pasenadi. If we were just physical bodies, with the mind just an epiphenomenon of physical processes, it’d be pretty miserable. The mountains would come in, they’d crush us, and that’d be the end.

But remember King Pasenadi’s reaction to the Buddha’s image. As the Buddha asked him, “If someone were to tell you that mountains were moving in from four directions, crushing everything in their path, then—reflecting on how hard it is to gain a human rebirth—what would you do?” And the king said, "Well, what else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?”

In other words, you don’t let your goodness die.

Remember the Buddha’s analysis of what a world is: your six senses. And remember that samsara is not a place. It’s an activity. It’s made out of your actions. That’s where the danger lies—in your actions—but it’s also where the promise lies.

If we were just physical things defined by the world, there’d be no way we could use the processes of the physical world to get out of the physical world. But because the world is made of our actions, we can use the processes of actions to get out of this web of actions that we’ve woven for ourselves.

This is where the fact of the complexity of kamma actually works to our advantage. It does have a disadvantage in that often we’re very confused as to what’s going to be helpful. Something looks good and looks okay and we do it and then we find out quite a

while later that it wasn't good at all in the long term. But the complexity of kamma also gives us freedom of choice. And we have the Buddha and we have the Dhamma to give us some basic instructions as to what's skillful and what's not, at the same time teaching us how to develop the qualities of mind where we can start to see these things for ourselves.

That's when you begin to realize that you can use your actions to take apart this web of actions. As the Buddha said, the noble eightfold path is the path of actions to the end of action. It's the fabricated path to the unfabricated. The complexity of kamma makes that possible.

And so, like King Pasenadi, you focus in on your actions right now. As things get swept away in the world, you want to make sure that you focus on what's really important, what you really are responsible for, which is what you're doing right now, what you're saying, what you're thinking right now. You also focus on the skills you can develop while doing this, because those skills will hold you in good stead. In some cases, they'll actually make all the difference here in this present world.

Think of the case of the Shackleton expedition to the Antarctic. Their ship had been crushed by the ice. There was nobody there to help them. It was just them in the vast, empty, frozen wilderness. They had to haul their small boats across the ice, and then the ice got slushy and difficult. But they kept at it. Everyone in the team knew what he had to do and he just did it. They didn't think about whether they would come out or not: In fact, most of them thought they were not going to survive. But they knew that at the very least what they would do in the present moment could make a difference, would have the possibility of making a difference, so they stuck with that.

They kept doing what they had to do, had to do, had to do, what they'd been trained and disciplined in doing, and that *did* make all the difference. They actually were able to get out, and nobody died.

So that's one point: The goodness you do can make all the difference right here and right now as to what kind of world you're living in.

The Thais have a very strong belief, and I think it's right, that one of the reasons they were able to escape a lot of the horrors of the twentieth century was because they harbored good monks, good people practicing the Dhamma. That protected them from all kinds of things.

Now, in case your past kamma is not good, things get really bad, and you die: Remember that you're developing skills right now that'll hold you in good stead even after death. All the qualities of the seven treasures are qualities you can develop and take with you.

There's another story about people being swept away. There was a group of Inuit that Barry Lopez talks about in *Arctic Dreams.* An Inuit family was on an ice floe, part of the ice shelf, and all of a sudden the floe got separated from the ice shelf and was swept

away by the currents in a big storm. They didn't come back, and didn't come back, and everybody else in the Inuit village assumed that they had all died.

Then a year or so later, they showed up, paddling back in their kayaks. What had happened was that their original kayaks and all their other belongings had been destroyed. They found themselves washed ashore in a place where they didn't have the usual trees or skins that they could use to make good clothing and kayaks. But they found other trees, other skins, and so they used the skills that they had developed to make everything they needed out of makeshift materials.

As they paddled back into the village, they were all laughing about what sorry-looking kayaks they had and what sorry-looking clothing they were wearing, but they had survived on the strength of their skills.

So think of this as you practice the Dhamma: You're developing the skills that will hold you in good stead wherever the currents of kamma may wash you up. That's an image from Ajaan Lee: In Thai he says, *kam sat pai,* which means that your kamma can throw you up on a beach someplace like a rogue wave. But as he said, if you have discernment, then even if the only other thing you have is a machete, then you can set yourself up in life. In other words, you've got the skills, you've got the knowledge, the inquisitiveness, a sense of generosity, all these other treasures that you've developed: Those will see you through.

Look at the forest ajaans themselves. They were born into very poor circumstances. Despite all the good they'd done in the past, they still had some bad kamma. They were born at the bottom of the totem pole in Thai society: peasants up in the northeast. Yet they had a past current that was also good, that helped them to be straightforward, honest, and wise in seeing what was really worthwhile and what was not. When they learned the Dhamma—when Ajaan Mun found the Dhamma and then brought it to teach them—they recognized it as the genuine thing. And it inspired them. They were able to become the great ajaans we bow down to today.

So have faith in what you're doing and in the skills you're developing here, because they can see you through, even when everything else starts collapsing and the mountains come moving in. And remember: The mind is not crushed by mountains. Your goodness is crushed only by your own discouragement, by your own lack of faith, your lack of conviction, lack of persistence. Those are the things that crush you, and yet those are also things you can do something about.

The mountains keep moving in, moving in. The world is swept away. It's the nature of the world. If the north mountain doesn't get you, the south mountain will. But they get just your body. So focus on your mind: That's your important refuge. All the skills you develop as you practice: Those are your refuge. Those don't get swept away.

Remember where the escape is. The escape is inside. You can't escape the world, as the Buddha said, by going to the edge of the cosmos. He had that image of the

skywalker—an interesting term that got picked up later by some moviemakers here—someone whose every stride could be measured in miles, and who could stride, stride, stride across the universe. And as he said, even if you were a skywalker and had a hundred-year lifespan, you wouldn't come to the end of the universe.

But he also said that you *can* come to the end of the world inside. There's a spot in the mind, there's a dimension, as he calls it, where the world has no footing. That's the end of the world. That's here inside you.

Some people say that your quest for finding that end of the world is selfish, and that you should be out there trying to keep the mountains away for a little bit longer. But you have to remember that to find that spot inside, generosity is one of the prerequisites, one of your inner treasures. We don't leave the world by trashing it. We develop generosity, we develop virtue, all the things that make human life good. But we do it in such a way that gets us out, because outside the world is a lot better than in.

Ajaan Suwat's Gift

April 5, 2017

The Thai phrase, "Don't be selfish," literally means, "Don't look after yourself," as opposed to looking after the common good. Ajaan Suwat always questioned that phrase, because, after all, who else are you going to look after? You've got to look after yourself. In fact, you're the person you have to look after more than anybody else. But that's not telling you to be selfish. It's saying that you have to look after yourself wisely —which means that you develop good qualities of mind, such as generosity and virtue, that actually help other people, too. But you do have to look after yourself, because nobody else can do it for you. As the Buddha said, when you get yourself as a refuge, you get a refuge that's hard to find. If you don't have that refuge, he said, who else could your refuge be?

Or as Ajaan Suwat put it another time, we each have one person in the world, i.e., the one person we're responsible for. And that person is us. We're responsible for our thoughts, our words, our deeds. We can't be responsible for anybody else's. Yet all too often that's what we're concerned about. We want to stop somebody else from doing this, or encourage them to do that, without turning around to look, well, are *we* doing what's right?

This is why we train our minds, because our actions come from here. This is the area for which we are responsible. We develop qualities like mindfulness, ardency, and alertness so that we can see what we're doing and recognize whether what we're doing is right or wrong. And then we have the strength to admit a mistake, and do what we can not to repeat the mistake. In other words, if something we like doing is going to give bad results, we have to figure out ways to prevent ourselves from doing it. If something we don't like doing is going to give good results, we have to talk ourselves into doing that. A large part of the wisdom of ardency is right there.

Ajaan Suwat was once asked why Buddhism didn't have a god. If only Buddhism had a god, the person said, it would give people a sense of reassurance that there was somebody out there looking out for them when they couldn't quite make it on their own. Ajaan Suwat's response was, "If there were some god who could ordain that if, when I took a mouthful of food, everybody in the world would get full, I would bow down to that god." But we're not connected that way. For all that they say about our being interconnected, the interconnections are actually a cause of suffering. We're interconnected to people who can do a lot of harm. We're interconnected to a world that can snuff us out very easily. All we need is an earthquake or a tsunami: It's as if the Earth is shrugging a little bit, and thousands of people can die.

So it's not the case that this interconnected system is designed for the well-being of everybody. It eats everybody up. And everybody else is eating everybody up, too. So our best contribution to the interconnected system is to get out, and to be a good example to others in getting out. It's not that we don't hope for other people to find the way out as well. We hope that they will. That's why we spread thoughts of goodwill every day, thinking, "May all beings be happy," primarily so that we can keep watch over our own actions, and then realizing that, to whatever extent we can help others, we're happy to help. But it has to start here. If you're going to tell people the right way to cook an egg, maybe it's good first to know how to cook an egg yourself.

So everything keeps coming back to your actions, right here, right now, right here, right now.

When the Buddha was talking about the evolution of the world, the devolution of the world—in other words, how society develops and then how it declines—he kept saying that it all comes from the actions of beings. Our interconnected actions are what create the world at large. But then, the world of *your* experience is the result of your actions, in an area that you don't share with anybody else. You know that old question about whether the way you see blue looks the same way as other people see blue? You don't know, and there's no way you could ever know. Now, blue's not a real issue, but pain is. The pain you feel, nobody else can feel for you. They can see the signs that you have pain and they can sympathize with you, but they can't really feel your pain.

So when the Buddha says to focus on the issue of why you're suffering, he's saying to focus on this area of your awareness, the area that you don't share with anyone else. And look in here as well for the cause of the suffering, and also for the solution. In other words, it's not the case that we suffer because of things outside. There can be bad things outside, but we don't have to suffer from them. We suffer from them because of our own lack of skill, our own lack of understanding. So the cause is inside, but the solution can also be found inside, in the qualities you develop: virtue, concentration, and discernment, based on a foundation of generosity and goodwill. Right here is where the real work has to be done. And when the work is done here, to the point where you have something solid inside, then you can share.

Up to that point, you really have to work on, as Ajaan Suwat would say, "getting" yourself. He would often comment, as we were getting the monastery started: "We're not here to get anybody else. We're here to get ourselves." And by that he meant, we're not going to go out of our way to make things attractive or to change things—to change the Dhamma or change the Vinaya—in order to appeal to people to get them to come. We use the Dhamma, we use the Vinaya, to practice. And if anyone else wants to practice that way, we're happy to have them come. But there's no need to go running out and trying to get people to come in. As he said, it's not that he couldn't think of ways of attracting people to the monastery, but every time he did, if it had nothing to do with the Dhamma and the Vinaya, he felt ashamed. He would think of Ajaan Mun, of

what Ajaan Mun might think.

But look at what we've got as a result: We've got a monastery that's grown. He died fifteen years ago, as of today, but the monastery is still going. So even though he was looking after himself, we're benefiting from that. That's how real helpfulness in the Dhamma happens: by looking after your own thoughts, words, and deeds, and specifically, by looking after your mind. That's how the Dhamma is spread. In other words, it's spread by actual actions, not just by words.

There was a piece recently about how Buddhists ought to get off of their cushion and get out there in the world and deal with the real causes of suffering, which are rooted in society. But the author was totally missing the point. The real causes are in here. The Buddha himself saw that you could change the world, but it would never be enough for people. As he said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires. So the pursuit of an ideal or a perfect world out there is never-ending. And a lot of people, in creating a perfect world, can create a lot of messes and harm for other people. The word for perfection that they use in the Canon applies to qualities you develop in the mind. *That's* where perfection can be found. The world is always going to be imperfect, but there is such a thing as perfect happiness. And it doesn't harm anyone. It doesn't place any burdens on anyone at all.

The Buddha gives us that test for what counts as Dhamma. First, in terms of the goal, it has to release the mind from fetters and from passion—in other words, to induce dispassion. Second, there are the things you do to attain that goal. You have to learn how to be content with getting just your basic needs met. You have to learn how to shed all of your unhealthy conceit, unhealthy pride, any thoughts of getting back at other people, and you have to put forth effort. Third, you also have to think about how your practice has an effect on other people. You want to stay unentangled, unburdensome. That's how you test the Dhamma, by seeing its impact in these three areas. The true Dhamma is a Dhamma that makes you self-reliant and makes you less of a burden on other people, but the purpose here is really to get out.

You might say the Buddha was an escapist, but he was escapist in the best sense of the word. He saw all the dangers that we create for ourselves and for other people by staying in the system. As he said, this is a system where eating is built into it. And so you want to look for the escape. And in finding it, you leave a trail behind for other people.

So, try to look after yourself in the best sense of the word, with wisdom and discernment, compassion, and all the other good qualities that are required to really look after yourself properly. Ajaan Suwat gave us an example, and let's hope that we can be an example to others.

Spread Goodness Around

December 29, 2016

There's a Pali word *puñña,* which doesn't get much good press in the West, largely because it's translated as "merit," which sounds like merit badges or Brownie points. When people hear about it, it sounds like a very materialistic attitude toward training the mind, gathering up as many points as you can.

Maybe we should translate it in another way: In one book I translated it as "inner quality" or "inner worth." You can also translate it simply as "goodness," which unfortunately is a word that also doesn't get used much anymore.

A while back, I went onto Amazon and I typed in different words like "honesty" and "truth" and "goodness" into the Search box, just to see what would come up. "Truth" was the worst: book after book claiming to tell us the truth about diseases and politicians, all of which seemed to have very little to do with the truth. "Goodness" led to recipe books: how to make good cakes and other baked goods. That's what "goodness" has come to mean in our culture.

But stop and think about it: What we really need is another type of goodness, goodness of the heart. We'd like a life in which there's that kind of goodness, inside and out—a life in which we can give of our goodness. That's what *puñña* is all about: creating goodness in the world through developing our own inner goodness.

Traditionally there are three main types: generosity, virtue, and meditation. This means that right now as we're meditating we're making *puñña* or "doing" *puñña*. As the Buddha said, don't be afraid of acts of *puñña*. They're another word for happiness.

That's what it's all about: finding happiness in a way where you're not taking anything away from anyone else. In fact, you're actually finding happiness through giving. This is the kind of happiness that creates a sense of unity in the world. The happiness that comes from *having* things requires that you have something but somebody else doesn't have it. And that creates divisions. But in the case of generosity, virtue, and meditation, there are no divisions, no boundaries. The happiness spreads around; the goodness spreads around.

Take generosity for example. Usually it's a matter of giving material things, but it also covers generosity of other kinds as well. You give of your knowledge, you give of your time, you give of your energy, you give your forgiveness: These are all good things to give and they don't need to cost any money.

And the nice thing about generosity is that it's totally free. In other words, the Buddha doesn't place any constraints on it. He said that if you try to prevent someone

from giving to someone else, you're creating obstacles for all three parties: the giver, the receiver, and yourself.

So when King Pasenadi asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" he replied, "Give where you feel inspired or you feel it would be well-used." Then the king went on to ask him, "When a gift is given, where does it give great fruit?" And the Buddha said, "That's another question entirely. You want to give to people who are free of greed, aversion, and delusion, or working on getting rid of their greed, aversion, and delusion."

In addition, you give in a way that you're not harming anyone. In other words, you don't steal something to give. You don't give gifts to people who are actually going to be harmed by using them, and you don't harm yourself in the process. But where you want to give, who you want to give to, what you want to give: That's a matter of free choice.

And that's an important point: The Buddha never pressured anybody to give. When he talked on the topic of generosity, it was *after* people had given something, to make them rejoice in the fact that they'd done something good. He was trying to make the point that we do have freedom of choice, and that the freedom to give feels really good. The times when you give because you *have* to give don't feel nearly as good as the times when, simply out of the goodness of your heart, you *want* to give. You realize you have something that others could use well, and you're happy to give it to them.

This relates to his teachings on kamma, that we do have freedom of choice in the present moment. The people who said that there was no worth in giving said, "Well, if everybody's predetermined to do whatever they're going to do, then those who give and those who don't give: it's simply a matter of the stars or the creator of the world or past actions forcing them to do that. So there's no virtue in giving." But the Buddha's saying, "No, there is virtue in giving because you're not predetermined. You're free to choose."

He's also saying that the people to whom you give have worth. It's not that there's nothing there or that the people get wiped out at death. They don't. They move on to wherever their cravings take them. And so when you help somebody, you give something to someone who's going to be lasting for a long time.

Giving is also a good topic for contemplation. As the Buddha said, when your practice is getting discouraging, stop and reflect on your generosity, on the fact that it proves that you at least have *some* goodness to you. If you try to think about the times when you were generous when you didn't have to be, but you can't think of any, well, go out and be generous. Make the news in the world, in your life, that you want to meditate on.

It's uplifting. It really does feel good and it really is, as the Buddha said, an act of happiness to do these things. You don't have to wait till your next lifetime: Right as you do it, it feels good.

The same with virtue: On the one hand, virtue means abstaining from harm, not doing things that are beneath your principles. But it also has a positive side. When the

Buddha advises you not to kill, he also recommends that you be gentle and protective of other beings. The same with the precept against stealing: You also protect other people's belongings as best you can. The precept against illicit sex: You respect people's rights; you don't let your lust overcome the bounds of propriety. The precept against lying: You try to be a person who tells the truth, you try to promote friendships, you try to promote goodness in other people as well. So there's a positive side to virtue, too.

And again, it doesn't cost you any money. Now, you may find that you're put at a disadvantage sometimes when you can't lie. But the things you get through lying are not really worth anything, because you've traded your virtue for what? Things that are just going to slip through your fingers like water. But the fact that you lost your virtue: That's not going to slip through your fingers anytime soon. That's going to stay with you.

Your virtue, too, is a good topic to reflect on. When the meditation gets dull or dry, at the very least you're not harming anyone. As when you're sitting right here right now: You're not harming anybody at all. There's goodness to that.

And finally with the meditation: In the list of the topics of *puñña,* inner quality or inner worth, the usual meditation topic is meditation on goodwill. When the Buddha talks about this, he gives a few images. He says it's like a person blowing a conch horn whose sound spreads out in all directions. You want your goodwill to spread out to everyone in all directions, all at once. He says at one point, "Even if bandits are sawing you apart, cutting off your limbs with a two-handled saw, you should still have goodwill for them, starting with them and then spreading it to the entire world."

And he recommends a few goodwill phrases, like the ones we chanted just now, "May all beings be happy, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease." That last phrase is to remind you that beings are really happy when they can look after themselves with ease. You're not saying you're promising to be there for them. You want them to be there for themselves. But all of this is to remind you, when you're dealing with difficult people, that you don't want ill will to get in the way. That's so that you can trust yourself.

And other people do benefit from your goodwill. Not only the good things you do and say, but also the good things you think. Some people really are sensitive to when a meditator has spread goodwill in their direction.

A woman who was one of Ajaan Fuang's students was once going through a rough time, so one evening, as I was meditating, I spread some goodwill in her direction. A few days later she came to the monastery. "The other night, did you spread goodwill to me?" she asked, and then she added, "I felt it." So some people do feel these things.

It's good practice, as you're spreading goodwill, to think of all the beings in the universe and to think of the ones for whom you might feel resentment or the ones whom you might look down on. Then remind yourself of the Buddha's teachings on

rebirth: We've been to all of these places before. As he said, if you see someone who's really wealthy, enjoying all kinds of pleasures: You've been there before. You see someone who's really poor and diseased: You've been there before. In fact, whatever type of person you can think of: You've been there before.

This is one of the sad things about Western Buddhism: They've thrown away this really useful teaching on rebirth. It's really great for empathy, it's great for seeing through differences. It means that nobody in the world is a stranger, in the sense that the suffering they're going through is not strange: You've been there. You've had that suffering, too.

They say that after the Buddha's awakening, he surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha, and he saw that all beings were on fire with the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion. That insight grew out of his second knowledge on the night of his awakening: seeing how all beings were reborn in line with their kamma, and how long it had been going on. Even though, after his awakening, he was now free from all that, he didn't look down on the beings who weren't free. Instead, he felt compassion, for he had been there, too. It was a combination of those two visions that propelled him to teach.

So when you think about these things, it helps you do good for other beings—with a sense, as I said, that nobody's a stranger. Regardless of race, gender, economic status: We've all been through this together, and we're all suffering together. So do you want to keep on creating more suffering?

Think of that other vision the Buddha had before he got on the path to awakening. The world was a little stream drying up and it was filled with fish competing with one another for that last little gulp of water. For what? You get the gulp of water, you still die. The water goes, but the kamma you've created in fighting all the other fish: That sticks with you. So why add to the suffering?

It's for these reasons that we develop goodwill. Even working on breath meditation is a form of goodwill for yourself, as you look after the energies in your body. You begin to realize that you've been placing a lot of burdens on your mind, unnecessary burdens, by allowing these energies to get all out of whack. But if you work on them and gain a sense of being balanced here in the concentration, a lot of the burdens in the mind get lifted. And then you have more time for other people.

So the meditation is a gift to yourself and to others. And when you want to dedicate the merit of your meditation, you've got something good to dedicate. As to whether they'll receive the merit or not, that depends on their ability to know and to appreciate it. The Pali word is *anumodana*, which basically means appreciation, seeing that what you did was a good thing. That then becomes a meritorious act on their part. In other words, they appreciate goodness. And the more we can develop an appreciation of goodness in the world, the better off we'll be.

So as you're meditating, it's a good way of developing inner worth, which then

becomes a happiness that spreads around. It's the best way to look for happiness. All three ways of developing inner worth are forms of happiness, forms of goodness, without blame.

Years back I was going to be giving a Dhamma talk on Buddhist ideas on the pursuit of happiness. The afternoon before I gave the talk, I happened to visit one of my old college professors, whose field was Christian ethics. He asked me what the talk that night was going to be about. And knowing the type of person he was, he wanted it quick and direct, so I said it was basically about how Buddhism teaches that the search for true happiness needn't be hedonistic. And he said, "I wish I could hear that talk."

But this is what it's all about: This search for inner goodness is the wise way, the heedful way, to search for happiness. Because it's not just for you. It's a happiness that spreads around.

The Lessons of Good Kamma

April 14, 2016

We look around us and we see a lot of people who have mastered a particular profession or a particular skill, who are very good at that one thing, but whose lives otherwise are a mess. They can be real bastards, horrible in their dealings with others or in the uses to which they put that skill.

The Dhamma's different. To really learn the Dhamma, you have to become a good person. This doesn't mean that you have to start out good, but it does mean that you have to develop a full range of virtues, all around, if you're really going to understand what the Buddha's talking about—and "understanding" it means not just understanding the words, but getting to the meaning, to where they're aimed.

The word "meaning" in Pali—*attha*—also means "goal." So when we talk about the meaning of the Dhamma, we're not just talking about translating it into other words. We're also talking about its purpose. It's meant to take you to a goal. It's meant to translate into changes in your mind, bringing about an experience, an understanding, an attainment within. To gain that experience and understanding and attainment requires lots of virtues.

The techniques of the meditation don't demand too much. You can learn how to focus on the breath, but as the Buddha said, you could be a person of little integrity and yet still do the meditation in the sense of getting the mind to be quiet for a while. But then you'd start misusing that quiet state, and that would get in the way of the deeper attainments, the really good part of the Dhamma—what the Buddha called the "essence of the Dhamma."

To get to the essence, you have to start with being honest and observant. As the Buddha once said, "Let a person come who is honest and observant, someone who's no dissembler, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." Honest, in the sense of being willing to observe what's really going on in your mind, and in your behavior, and being willing to admit to yourself and others any mistakes you make. Honesty is not just a matter of the way you treat other people. It's also a matter of the way you treat your internal conversation. Ideally, you first observe what's going on, then you admit to yourself what you've done, and then you can learn. So this comes down to honesty and an ability to really see things and notice what's going on, and not just to be apathetic and let things pass by.

In another passage where the Buddha's teaching kamma, he starts with the virtues of generosity and gratitude. For most of us, when we hear about kamma, there's that

"Oh darn" moment, where we start thinking about all the bad things we did in the past and all the bad things that are going to happen to us in the future because of that. But the Buddha doesn't start with the bad things at all. He starts with the good. He does say that certain actions tend to lead to certain results, but the fact that a past bad action has happened doesn't mean that you, acting in the future, can't make some changes in how it's going to be experienced.

He gives the analogy of a crystal of salt. You've got a crystal of salt, say, the size of your fist. If you put it into a cup of water, you can't drink the water because the water is way too salty. But if you put it into a large, expansive river of clean water, you can still drink the water in the river. In the same way, if you develop an expansive mind, the results coming from past actions, even though they may be large crystals of salt, don't necessarily mean you have to suffer.

So when the Buddha's teaching kamma, it's not primarily for the purpose of making you feel guilty or bad about what you've done in the past. He always emphasizes the fact that you have to realize you've made mistakes in the past, but you can resolve not to do them again. Then you develop an expansive mind: a mind of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. A mind trained not to be overcome by pleasure or by pain. A mind developed in virtue and discernment. These qualities expand your mind, so that what comes in from the past doesn't have to make you suffer.

What the Buddha does emphasize when he introduces the topic of kamma is the need to be responsible and to focus your attention on your present kamma, and not to worry about the past. Your focus on the present moment is not simply for the purpose of being fully present to everything in the present. It's for the purpose of looking closely at the choices you're making and the results they give rise to. What are you doing right now? What's happening as a result?

When he was teaching kamma to his son, basically what he was teaching was how to be honest and how to be observant, so that his son would be a good enough person to learn the Dhamma to begin with. First, he reminds his son of the virtue of being truthful. That's the honesty. Then he tells him what to be observant about, and how: "Look at your actions. When you plan to do something, what do you expect is going to come from that action? If you expect anything harmful, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it.

"While you're acting, if any harm comes up"—because, after all, some of your actions have immediate results; you don't have to wait until the next lifetime. It's like spitting into the wind. You don't have to wait for the next lifetime for the spit to come back at you. "If any harmful results are coming up, stop what you're doing. Don't feel that you're committed to continuing with the action. If you don't see any harm, you can continue with what you're doing. Then when you're done, you look at the long-term results." This is where the honesty has to come in, and the ability to be observant,

seeing what you did and the results that came from what you did, and being truthful about it.

If you made a mistake, you go talk it over with someone else, someone who's more advanced on the path, so that you can get some good ideas on how not to repeat the mistake. If you see no bad results, then take joy in the fact that you're making progress on the path and try to continue with the progress, training day and night.

The Buddha's teaching a lot of good qualities of character here. He's teaching compassion: You don't want to harm anybody. He's teaching integrity, teaching the ability to take responsibility for your actions. He's also encouraging a desire and a willingness to learn, and he's showing you how to do it.

This is how you become honest. This is how you become even more observant. This is how you make good use of the teaching on kamma. Instead of getting upset about things you've done in the past, you say, "Look, I can focus on the present moment and that'll make all the difference." That way, you can learn from what you do in the present moment.

In another place where the Buddha introduces kamma, the main emphasis is on generosity and gratitude, focusing on the fact that people do have choices they're responsible for, and because we have choices we're responsible for, generosity means something. A lot of people don't like the idea of responsibility. They'd rather have kamma-free zones in large areas of their lives where they can do what they want and not have to deal with the results, or have someone else protect them from the results. But that attitude is childish.

If you wanted to live in a world where your actions had no results, that would also mean that generosity would have no meaning. Gratitude would have no meaning. Actions would just be thrown around, without any consequences—but they wouldn't have any meaning, either. Nothing would have any meaning. It's because we *are* responsible for our actions that they do have meaning. So when other people help us, we have to think about the extent to which they went out of their way: That might not have always been easy for them. You want to have gratitude for that.

Gratitude here is something stronger than appreciation. We can appreciate the sun. We can appreciate the sky and the trees—appreciate just the way things are that enables us to live. But gratitude is something different. Gratitude is for actions that people have done. The word in Pali, *kataññu,* literally means having a sense or an awareness of what was done—and that deserves a special quality of the heart more than just appreciating how nice things can be. You realize that somebody had to do something, to go out of his or her way, for some of your conditions in life to be good. If you don't have any gratitude for that, it's very unlikely that you're going to go out of your way to help others.

This connects with what the Buddha said about generosity. The fact that we have

choices and that our choices have results means that when you think of being generous to someone else, that's a good thing. That's to be encouraged. It really does have meaning. There's a sutta where the Buddha says that if you're stingy, there's no way you're going to be able to attain jhana, and no way at all that you're going to attain any of the noble attainments.

It's good to think about why. If you're generous, if you take something over which you have rights, something no one can force you to give away, but you decide of your own accord that you want to give it away: The internal dialogue that goes with that is good for the mind. It gives you practice in overcoming your greed, your aversion, and all the other unskillful attitudes that would get in the way of being generous and freely giving something away. You've lifted yourself above your defilements, and it was a free choice.

This is why there are lots of rules for the monks around how they treat the generosity of lay people. Monks are the beneficiaries of generosity, so we have to be very careful that we don't abuse that position. And one of the things that the Buddha advises is that if someone asks you, "Where should I give?" you say, "Give where you feel inspired, where you feel it will be well used and well taken care of." That's it. You don't go out fundraising. You don't go out making hints that you'd like this thing or that. You wait for people to make the offer. If they make the offer—if they say, "Let me know what you need"—that's a special case. But even then, you don't want to abuse their generosity. Ajaan Fuang said that he was always very careful around this issue. The only things he would ask for in cases like that would be Dhamma books and medicine. That was it—in other words, things that were really necessary.

The reason why there are all these rules around generosity is because the Buddha wants to preserve the free choice involved in the gift. But, in giving, you learn not only the lesson of the fact of free choice. You also learn the lessons that come from watching your internal dialogue over how to give up a particular object, how to give up the sum of money that it costs to buy something or how to give up the time that you could use for something you want to do, and instead you make a gift of that to someone else to help them—or when you give your energy or you give of your forgiveness in situations where it's hard.

That internal dialogue where you can talk yourself into doing the right thing in these cases is a good exercise for the mind, because after all, as you get the mind into meditation, you're going to have to be giving up a lot of other things that, again, are within your rights to hold onto. You have the perfect right to sit here and think lustful thoughts for an hour, or angry thoughts for an hour, but then what would you gain? The mind would get even more lustful, get even more likely to be angry. You'd shorten your fuse. But once you learn to give these things up of your own free will and learn how to talk yourself into putting them down and letting them stay down, you've learned an important skill. This is one of the reasons why generosity is so essential throughout the

practice.

Luang Pu Dune used to like to say that the whole practice is one thing all clear through, from the beginning to the very end. It's all about letting go. Well, letting go requires an internal dialogue, where the good side of your nature takes charge over the greedier or more narrow side of your nature so that you can develop the goodness that's required for the Dhamma—so that you can actually understand and see the Dhamma, experience the essence of the Dhamma.

So look at your opportunities to be generous as opportunities to see and understand the Dhamma, to practice the internal dialogue that's needed in areas where you discover you're more attached than you thought you were. Certain things you can give away and it's no big deal, but certain of your defilements, certain types of greed or aversion, things you really like, you're really attached to: You tend to identify yourself around them—"This is the way I am and it's going to take a long time for me to change"—that kind of attitude. If you haven't learned how to be generous, it's going to be hard to give up these things that are even stickier, where the attachment goes even deeper.

So it's good to make a practice of generosity so that you can begin chipping away and learning the skills you need to give up the things you have a perfect right to keep, but are really not in your own best interest to keep. You'd be much better off letting them go.

Turning Anxiety into Heedfulness

November 20, 2016

There's something of a tension in the chants we repeat in the evening before the meditation. On the one hand, there are chants like the one we had just now, "The world is swept away, it does not endure, it's a slave to craving," and then, on the other hand, "May I be happy."

There's also the tension between the chant, "I'm subject to aging, illness, death, separation," and then, "May I be happy."

But to understand this tension is to understand how and why we practice. We don't try to be happy by denying the fact that there are dangers out there. We try to find happiness in the midst of the dangers—realizing, of course, that not all the dangers are out there. It's not just a dangerous world. We're dangerous people. Because of our craving and clinging, we can do all kinds of unskillful things.

So the teaching is aimed at admitting that this is the way things are and then asking, "How do you find well-being in the midst of all this?" This is why we develop heedfulness as one of the main motivators for our practice. We have these chants on how things are swept away, and how aging, illness, and death are normal, to remind ourselves that we really do need to train the mind.

Because heedfulness is just that: a sense of the dangers, but taking whatever fear you might have about the dangers and directing it in the right way. It's combined with confidence, that there is a right way to find happiness here.

This is where heedfulness differs from anxiety. With anxiety, you don't really know what to do. You have no confidence that you have any right way of acting, of preventing the dangers. But with heedfulness, you do have a sense of confidence. And you get your priorities straight.

There's a series of suttas where the Buddha talks about future dangers. Among them is the fact that society can fall apart and collapse, and in times like that it's difficult to practice. So you should practice *now,* while you've got the chance, so that when that danger comes, you can still have an inner sense of well-being that you can depend on. In other words, you will have found something inside that can't be affected by changes outside. You've straightened out the inside issues, so the mind doesn't pose any danger to itself.

So fear of danger is not necessarily a bad thing. It depends on how you use it. If you let yourself get wrapped up in anxiety, then it really is detrimental. But there's a more skillful fear, and that's fear that you'll do something really unskillful.

The Pali term is *ottappa.* The Thais translate it as "fear of evil." It doesn't mean fear of evil things outside. It means fear of the consequences of *your* doing evil. In English, it's hard to find a good translation for it: "Compunction" comes closest, the realization that the real dangers in life are in your own actions and so you want to be very careful about what you do.

But, in being careful about your actions, you can actually provide a happiness that is secure. So there's a bright side to all this as well. If everything were just aging, illness, death, aging, illness, and death, with no escape, then that old charge about Buddhism's being pessimistic would have been true. But that's not the case. The Buddha says there is a way out. Now, we can't haul everybody we love and everything we love along with us on the way out. So this does require a certain sense of priorities as to what really is important to protect and what you have to be willing to sacrifice.

Where your attachments are focused is going to determine whether they're relatively safe or not. If you have lots of attachments in the world, as Ajaan Lee said, you have lots of magnets out in the world that are going to pull you to where they are. It's like leaving yourself exposed on many sides. Wherever you have an attachment, there you're exposed.

So you want to bring all your attachments inside. In other words, realize that the qualities of your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—are your real treasures. Those are the things you can hold onto, even as the world changes for the worse.

As the Buddha said, loss in terms of your wealth or health, loss in terms of your family: Those are relatively minor dangers. The real dangers are loss in terms of losing right view and losing your virtue.

So there are times when you have to be willing to face loss outside. But you always want to maintain your dignity as a human being. You don't want events outside to control your emotions—to start doing things under the power of your emotions and then say, "Well, it was just because so-and-so said this or so-and-so said that. That's why I said this." When that happens, you become just a cog in a machine and let yourself get pushed around. It's when you can stand back and say, "No. Even if people mistreat me, I will still behave in an honorable way": That pulls you out of the machine. It makes you independent.

There will be a healthy sense of self that goes along with this. In psychology, they talk about the healthy ego function of anticipation: seeing that there are dangers out there and that you've got to prepare for them. This is what corresponds to heedfulness in the Buddha's teachings.

It's strange that a book on healthy ego functions I once read never mentioned a sense of honor, but this is an important motivator. A sense of honor is an important aspect of a healthy self that you create as part of the path: that no matter how bad

things get, you're not going to let the bad things come into your actions, into your thoughts, into your words, your deeds. That sense of honor will be your protection.

In Pali, this corresponds both to compunction and to a sense of shame: that you'd be ashamed to stoop to doing something really mean and low. And, as the Buddha said, that's one of the protectors of the world—and in protecting the world, you're also protecting yourself.

All the precepts are like that. When you make up your mind that you're not going to kill under *any* circumstances, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to have illicit sex or take intoxicants under *any* circumstances, you're giving universal safety. Of course, you can't protect everybody from everybody else, but you can say, "*I'm* not posing any danger to anybody at all." And when your precepts become universal like that, then, as the Buddha says, you have a share in that universal safety.

So this is where our security lies: in our practice. Things outside may change, but the general outline of how to find safety inside is always the same.

Remember that story of the Buddha talking to King Pasenadi. King Pasenadi comes to see him in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from, great king, in the middle of the day?" And the king says, "Oh, the typical things that kings do when they're mad for power." It's amazing that he's so frank.

And the Buddha says, "Suppose someone from the East came and said, 'There's this huge mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path.' And someone else comes from the South, another person comes from the West, another person comes from the North, and they all say, 'There are these mountains coming in from the East, South, West, and North, crushing all beings in their path.' Given that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?"

King Pasenadi replies, "What else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma, with whatever little time I have left?"

And the Buddha says, "In that case, I warn you, great king: Aging, illness, and death are moving in from all directions, crushing living beings in their path. Given that human life is so hard to come by, what are you going to do?" Of course, the king gives the same answer: "Calm the mind; practice the Dhamma."

That's where our focus should always be, because that's where our true wealth is. That's where our true safety lies. And it doesn't matter which mountain moves in first, the mountains are going to get you. But they're going to get just the body. Don't let them get your mind. Have the confidence that you can keep the mind separate.

As for times when anxiety does come up, remember that whatever happens in the world, you're going to need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to deal with the unexpected. So instead of laying out all kinds of scenarios about what you'll do if this happens, what you'll do if that happens—which would just eat up all your time—just remind yourself that the qualities you'll need for unexpected situations

are qualities you can develop right now as you meditate.

In this way, you can turn your anxiety into heedfulness. And then it actually becomes a positive force in the practice. Because, as the Buddha said, "All skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness." Those skillful qualities are the things that will create your haven of well-being, even in the midst of dangers all around you.

The world will never stop being a dangerous place, but you can learn to stop posing dangers to yourself and others. In so doing, you find that you really can create a haven inside.

And although you can't create a haven for everybody else, at least your haven will be a good influence, to whatever extent you have an influence on the world. So there's nothing selfish about finding this well-being inside. You're taking yourself out of the food chain; you're taking yourself out of the danger chain. And that's a huge gift right there.

Respect for the Precepts

January 29, 2015

Several years ago I was taking part in a discussion on the precepts, and a large part of the discussion concerned how to deal with ants in your house: How do you keep them out of the kitchen, how do you keep them out of the house without killing them? We went over all the ways in which you can deter ants with things like talcum powder, cinnamon, and paprika. And at the end of the discussion one of the participants, who hadn't been participating all that much, commented sarcastically, "Well, tonight we've had a very deep discussion on the issue of ants." And the thing was that his sarcasm was so dead wrong.

One of the purposes of the precepts is to force you to look more carefully at what you're doing. After all, if you're going to be mindful and alert, you have to be very attentive to your actions and their results. Holding strictly to the precepts is a very good way of getting practice in that kind of mindfulness and alertness. In fact, as the Buddha said, one of the bases for establishing mindfulness is that your precepts are pure. You've learned how to look carefully at what you're doing, you think carefully about the consequences, and you learn how to do things more carefully as well.

For a lot of us, "deep issues" have to do with abstractions. But all too often, abstractions are just curtains, films over what's actually going on. Years back, the same group of people had met and one of the women had just come back from a retreat where the theme of the retreat was the absolute and the relative and how to see your daily life as an interplay of the two. Someone mentioned the old joke about how the relative in the absolute is your uncle in the liquor cabinet, and the absolute in the relative is when he's drunk all your vodka. At any rate, as the woman was talking about the absolute and the relative and trying to apply those concepts to her life, you could see she was getting more and more confused. So it's good to strip things down to actual, concrete details. And the precepts are a very good way of doing that. At the same time, meditating on your precepts is an important part of the practice. When you can look at your actions and realize that you haven't harmed anybody, that you've held to your principles, it gives you the self-esteem and confidence needed to get the mind into the type of concentration that will lead to discernment. Then concentration and discernment will help make your practice of the precepts even more solid and perceptive.

One of the distinctive principles of the forest tradition is its understanding of the interplay among virtue, concentration, and discernment. Usually, outside of the forest tradition, they're taught three-in-a-row like that: You start with virtue and then, when that's good, you learn concentration, and then when that's good you work on your

discernment. But from the beginning of his practice, Ajaan Mun realized that you can't do it that way. You have to use all three simultaneously so that they strengthen one another. You use the concentration to firm up your virtue; you use your discernment to firm up your virtue and your concentration.

Thinking about the precepts is an important part of the meditation. It comes under right effort and generating desire to avoid unskillful qualities. Look at your precepts to ask yourself, "Are there times when I want to break them and I feel that it's okay to break them?" If you don't hold thoroughly to the precepts, you get sloppy about avoiding unskillful qualities in daily life, and as a result, your meditation breaks down. So what is this feeling that says it's okay to break them?

A lot of people say that the precepts don't have to be followed all that carefully. One argument that's offered is that the precepts are not divine commandments—as if only divine commandments had to be followed carefully. After all, the precepts are training rules. You can't train in them if you have some assumptions of your own to which you give priority. You may say, "In this case, the precepts have to be put aside because something else is more important." But this denies you the opportunity to look into what you think is more important and to start questioning it.

Another argument I saw recently is that the precepts aren't even as serious as civil law. Civil law has exemptions, they said, so therefore the precepts must have exemptions. Again, the civil law's not there to train us for the purpose of true happiness. It's just there to keep us from killing one another or running into one another on the road.

The precepts, though, are for you to look at your actions and to figure out where you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering. They're elemental to the practice. If you hold to them carefully, you have to start looking at your whole life a lot more carefully, too. That way, you can detect attachments you wouldn't have seen otherwise. And only when you can detect these things can you undo the unskillful behavior based on them. This is why it's important to ask yourself those questions: Where *would* you be tempted to break a precept? Where would you be tempted to kill, where would you be tempted to steal, to have illicit sex, to lie, take intoxicants? The two big ones tend to be killing and lying: Where would you be tempted to do these things?

You ask yourself and then, when you get an answer, you ask yourself further, "Well, why would you be tempted? Why do you think that that being's life is not worth leaving unharmed?" You can't go around protecting all beings, but you can know that your behavior has not harmed that being. That's something you *can* be responsible for—and you can also be responsible for not trying to get other people to do the harm for you. Those are the two areas where you really are responsible.

So look at your behavior: Where have you been killing in the past? Where have you been lying in the past? Can you deal with those sorts of situations in such a way that

you *don't* kill, you *don't* lie? What would be required of you? How many extra pains would it take? What attitudes would you have to abandon? How much more careful would you have to be?

Say, about your speech, areas where you might lie casually because you thought you could gain an advantage or avoid problems: Can you still gain an advantage, can you still avoid problems *without* lying? What would that require of you? The Buddha doesn't define lying as not telling the whole truth. This is an important distinction. There are situations where you can say to yourself, "If I actually told the whole truth in this situation, it would cause a lot of harm. How can I get around that without misrepresenting the truth?" As the Buddha said, if telling the whole truth would lead to the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, either in yourself or in the person listening, you don't say it. Now that doesn't mean you lie. In other words, what you do say is not a misrepresentation of the facts. You find something else to talk about, you find a way to express yourself that is technically true. But you don't misrepresent the truth of the things you *do* mention.

Now some people say this is just splitting hairs, but that's not necessarily the case. Take the case that people are constantly using to argue that there are times when you have to lie: the case of Nazis at the door and Jews in the attic. What are you going to do? First you have to realize there are Nazis and there are Nazis. With some of them, all they need is an excuse not to have to go through your house. They don't want to bother, so you say something that indicates to them that it's not worth their bother to go in. There are other Nazis, though, who, regardless of what you say, are going to check the house. All too often it's assumed that when you lie to Nazis they'll believe you and then go away. But that covers only some of the cases. There are other cases where, if the Nazis sense that you're lying, they'll be even more interested in searching your house.

So first you've got to realize that you're dealing with different kinds of situations here: one, in which no matter what you say there's going to be trouble, and the other, in which you can deflect harm but without lying. So if they ask if you're hiding Jews in the attic, you say, "I'm hiding nothing shameful in this house."

This has two advantages. One, you can say it looking them straight in the eye. Some Nazis, like some policemen, can read your face. If they're convinced you're telling the truth—and you *are* telling the truth—they'll leave you alone. The second advantage is this: Suppose you say, "I've got no Jews in the attic," but they say, "We're going to check anyhow," and they find the Jews. When they come back out, they can give you a lecture on ethics: "Not only do you hide Jews but you also lie." Imagine what it'd be like to be lectured by a Nazi. And, of course, they won't stop with a lecture. They'll take you away and torture you—and with your lie you've given them ammunition to torture you psychologically.

But if you tell them you're hiding nothing shameful and yet they find the Jews, they'll take the Jews out and say, "We thought you said you weren't hiding anything,"

and you say, "I said I was hiding nothing shameful; there's nothing shameful about what I did." Now, they may decide to arrest you then, too, but at least you have your honor and that's something important. Our culture deprecates honor. But being able to maintain your honor is important. It's part of your self-worth. If they decide to torture you, they won't be able to use a lie against you.

This means that you're not holding the precept just for the sake of following the letter. There are actually practical advantages to following the letter.

So that's one thing to look at: the implications of your actions and how they will bear fruit down the line.

The other is if you feel you have higher moral standards that lie above the precepts, you have to question them. Are they really higher? Are they really practical? Recently someone has argued that there are times when, to protect innocent people, you're duty-bound to kill other people. But can you ever really know for sure that, in killing one person, it will really protect another person? What you do know is that you've chosen to kill. You've chosen to do something unskillful.

At the same time, what is this requirement to protect innocent people at all costs? Is it something you could practically carry out—to protect all the innocent people in the world? How can you do that? People have their kamma. You do your best to protect the innocent, but if it would require that you do something unskillful, you have to realize that their kamma lies beyond your help. Two wrongs don't make a right.

The purpose of protecting your precepts in this way is to ferret out and question the views you're attached to. Are they really worthy of attachment, especially if they get you to end up doing something really unskillful? You decide you're going to protect this person by killing that person, but what are the consequences down the line? Those things begin to snowball. You set a bad example for others. You set a bad example for yourself. But if you make sure that your actions don't break the precepts and you're not getting anybody else to break the precepts, you've covered what you are responsible for and what you can know. You've set an honorable example, and you haven't let high-sounding abstractions get in the way.

So these are two of the important reflections that the precepts force on you if you take them really seriously. One, are there other ways you could behave so that you don't have to lose what you value and at the same time you don't break a precept? As in the case of small animals, pests in the house, this requires you to be a lot more careful about how clean you keep things, how you design your house if you have the option of building a new house. It requires you to think like an ant, to watch the behavior of ants, and that's a good exercise in putting yourself in other people's shoes. In Thailand, they've perfected ways of making sure, with moats and other things, that ants don't invade the monks' huts. It takes a little extra time, a little extra care, but it's time and care well spent—because you're thinking about your actions, you're thinking about

their consequences, so you're more careful.

And then there's the second reflection: You learn to question some of the notions to which you hold very strongly that would act as excuses for breaking the precepts. You learn to see how some very noble-sounding ideals are actually a cover-up for unskillful behavior.

This is why holding to the precepts across the board is a really important training for the mind. You become alert. You become more mindful, more sensitive to things, and that's pretty deep—a lot deeper than throwing abstractions around. It takes a certain amount of humility to submit yourself to a precept like this, to say, "I'm going to put my preconceived notions on hold and see what it's like to really try to live by the precepts."

This falls in line with another principle of the forest tradition, which is what Ajaan Mun—following the Buddha—called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, you adjust yourself, your attitudes, and your actions to fit in with the Dhamma, not the other way around. All too many of us say, "Well, let's change the Dhamma here, change the Dhamma there; after all, we're Westerners, we need a Western Dhamma"—that kind of attitude. How about putting that attitude aside, to say, "What would it be like if I really did train by these things, if I gave them more respect than I give to my own opinions?" It's only then that you learn to detect things in yourself that otherwise you wouldn't see.

So this reflection on the precepts is good for your mindfulness—and as a result, it's going to be good for your concentration. It's also a good exercise in discernment, to expose corners of your mind that otherwise stay hidden, and to uproot some really firmly entrenched ideas that would otherwise keep you suffering for a long time.

Wisdom for Dummies Revisited

February 4, 2017

We like to think of Buddhist wisdom as something subtle and abstract. And there are aspects of the Buddha's teachings that *are* subtle and abstract. But wisdom has to start with some very basic things, too. You might call it "Wisdom for Dummies." And that means you: You're not going to get to the higher levels until you've mastered the basics.

There are two ways in which the Buddha talks about very basic levels of wisdom. One is if there's something that you like to do but is going to give bad results, you know how to talk yourself out of it. The other is that if there's something that you don't like to do but is going to give good results, you're able to talk yourself into it. In other words, you learn how to psych yourself up. You learn to look at the long term rather than the short term. And you try to figure out what the problem is with your attitude, how you can get around your laziness.

We were talking this afternoon about laziness when getting up in the morning. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the different excuses people give for laziness: "I didn't get enough sleep last night," "I'm tired," "I worked yesterday," "I'm going to be working tomorrow," "I came back from a trip yesterday," "I'm going on a trip tomorrow," "I've been sick." And then he compares those with the reasons that another person might give for being more energetic in the practice. And it turns out they're the same reasons: "I worked a lot yesterday but now I've got a chance to meditate today," "I'm going to be working tomorrow but I've got this chance to meditate now," "I've been sick, but finally I've gotten over that, so I can meditate some. I may still be weak, but the illness could come back. So here's my chance."

In other words, there's no difference in the objective situation. The difference is in your attitude. So if the voices to get you more energetic are not there in your mind, try to learn some of them. Because you're not the only one who likes to sleep in late—everybody likes to sleep in late. Ajaan Maha Boowa complained about how lazy he was. And here he was: someone who eventually could sit five or six hours as if it were nothing. We all have to figure out some way to get around our laziness.

At the same time, there are things we like to do that we have to learn how to say No to. Learn how to see their drawbacks. At the very least, put up a fight. All too often, the voices in the mind say, "You're going to be giving in anyhow in five minutes, so why don't you give in now, so we don't have to waste a lot of time and energy." You can respond and say, "Well, I don't know about five minutes from now, but right now I'm responsible for right now. So if it's something I should do, I'm going to do it now. If it's

something I shouldn't do, I won't be doing it now. We'll talk about five minutes in five minutes' time."

Another one of the reasons they'll give is, "You'll get up and meditate, but you're not going to last very long, so why bother?" So you say, "At least I'll get up, get into position, and then we'll talk from there." It's not like you're committed, that once you get up you have to meditate. But you say, "Well, at least give it a try." The same when you find yourself doing something you shouldn't be doing. You've started doing it and part of the mind will say, "Well, now that you've started, you're committed and you might as well go all the way." You say, "No. I can stop."

So learn how to psych yourself up. It's all very simple, but the problem is that you tend to identify with certain voices in the mind, and they make it complex. You've got to learn how to withdraw your sense of identification from them and learn to see those voices as not-self.

Again, we like to think of the not-self teaching as something very abstract and subtle. But it's something we're doing all the time—we're not-selfing all the time in order to self new things. You self an idea and then another idea comes up, so you not-self the first idea and then self the second one. Learn to be a little more systematic about how you do that. Learn to view your sense of self and the activity of not-selfing as tools. Then ask yourself, "When is it skillful to identify with this idea? And when is it skillful to identify with that idea?" You have the freedom to choose. Selfing is a verb. It's an activity, a kind of kamma. And as with all kinds of kamma, the question is, "When is it skillful? When is it not?"

So give yourself a little more freedom around this issue. The idea that you're committed to being a certain way or a certain sort of person: That gets in the way of the practice. If everybody were committed to being the way they already were, the Buddha wouldn't have bothered teaching. It wouldn't have served any purpose at all. But he saw that we *can* train ourselves. Part of the mind can train the rest of the mind. It's simply a matter of getting the good part of the mind, the part that really does wish for your true well-being, to have more power.

This is one of the reasons why, when we meditate, we work with the breath to gain a sense of well-being. The good part of the mind needs help. And working with the breath gives the rest of the mind a sense of well-being as well, gives the whole body a sense of well-being—so that the next time you think about meditating, you'll have a good association with it. You'll remember that once you make the effort of settling in, it feels really, really good. That becomes your incentive to get up early the next morning and to try it again.

The other basic role of wisdom is that when things go wrong, when things don't go well in life, you learn to give yourself pep talks. This can apply to the meditation: Everyone is going to have barren stretches in the meditation. It's common. There are

times, at the beginning, when things are opening up inside, all kinds of new and interesting things are happening, but then it levels out and you're stuck with the same-old same-old, over and over again. Well, learn how to see that maybe something else is going on in that "same-old" mind that you're not seeing right now. Sometimes the mind makes some progress and then it has to fill in the details. It makes a quick sketch and then it has to fill in the rest of the sketch, and it's going to take time.

I had a Thai friend who was an artist. Sometimes he would do large traditional Thai paintings. He was working once on a large painting of Rama, and his wife came into the studio one afternoon after he'd been working for hours on little tiny details. She looked at the painting and said, "Oh, you didn't get much done today did you?" He said, "I've been working all day."

There are parts of the mind where you have to fill in the details before you're going to be able to move on. So learn how to keep yourself in a good mood in the meantime. Maybe the results aren't coming as quickly as possible or the changes aren't coming as quickly as you'd like, but just keep with it, keep with it, keep with it.

Think of the Shackleton expedition. They lost their ship down near Antarctica. Help was hundreds and hundreds of miles away. And their situation was pretty bleak. But the captain gave them good pep talks and he looked after everyone. He made sure that all the men did what they could—and what they should. They'd all learned, "This is what you have to do in a situation like this," and so he made sure everybody did just that. He said, "At the very least, if we die, we'll know we're not dying from our carelessness or our own laziness. If we die doing our duty, that's an honorable death." And they all made their way out.

So as you're meditating, you're not going to die from the meditating, but at the very least say, "I'm going to do it well. I'm going to stick with the steps. I don't want to fail in meditation because of carelessness." Oftentimes, when progress is not happening, it's because you're getting sloppy in the details. So go back and think about step one, step two, step three. And don't think that it's embarrassing to go back to step one, two, or three.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a path over which you walk back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, many times. He says, one, the path gets worn smooth, and two, you see little details you wouldn't have noticed if you walked through it just once. A lot of this has to do with the fact that the mind is a complex thing and sometimes you have to go over the same things again and again and again to see all the implications.

So that's another aspect of basic wisdom or wisdom for dummies. Of course, this kind of wisdom is not going to keep you dumb. In fact, it's the kind of wisdom that gets you out of being a dummy. The dummies are the ones who want to learn about emptiness and dependent co-arising all at once without having any foundation. All they get are perceptions, labels in the mind. They don't actually see where these teachings

are useful and why they're useful tools. The Buddha didn't teach these things just to show off how smart he was. Everything he taught was for a purpose. And when your mind is ready, then you see, "Oh, this serves that purpose." When you've gotten more skillful at selfing and not-selfing your ideas, for example, you've got a good foundation for how to use the not-self teaching in the most skillful way possible. People who don't have that background, though, can take the not-self teaching and use it to shoot themselves in the foot.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of people who want to get gold out of rock. They see somebody taking a big pick-ax and carrying big loads of rock back to the smelter, and they say to themselves, "That's dumb. Who wants all that rock? All you want is the gold." So they go and take a little tiny toothpick to get just the gold right out of the rock, but it doesn't work that way. You have to take the rock and put it in the smelter and subject it to heat, and then the metals—tin, lead, copper, silver, and gold—will come melting out of their own accord. In other words, you focus on the practical details of making right effort, even if they seem mundane—that's what the smelter stands for—and the gold will appear in your mind.

There's a lot in the meditation that you can't anticipate. You can't plan too far ahead. But you know: These are the steps. We're lucky that we have them laid out for us. Ajaan Lee's seven steps in his "Method 2": If there's something going wrong in your meditation, look and see which of the steps you're not getting right or which ones you're getting sloppy about. Then you just keep doing them again and again and again. And give yourself pep talks.

It's like any manual skill that involves a lot of repetitive actions—like sharpening a knife on a whetstone: When you're sharpening a knife, you have to be alert. And you have to be very sensitive to make sure that you're not ruining the blade by making some parts too sharp or wearing down some parts too much and others not enough. The edge of the blade has to be very even and smooth. So you have to give yourself pep talks as you're sitting there, rubbing the blade over the stone, over the stone, over the stone, again and again and again. If you keep your spirits up, you find that you can make your way through and do the job well.

This may be one of the reasons why the ajaans and Zen masters of old would have you learn a manual skill before you meditated, because the qualities of mind that go into mastering a skill are precisely the qualities of mind you need to meditate.

But they're basic not because they're dumb. They're basic because they're important. They're essential to everything else. One: the teaching on learning how to put the long term ahead of the short term. And two: the teaching on how not to let things get you down when the long term seems long. Every other aspect of wisdom, no matter how refined, comes out of these two principles. They're the habits that will help see you all the way through.

Defilements Are Real

February 14, 2017

A lot of people don't like the word "defilement." This is true not just of modern people in the West. Even way back in Buddhist history there were people who said, "Well, as long as you realize that the defilements are not real, then they have no power over you and that's the end of the problem." That particular attitude has managed to hang on in the Buddhist tradition up to now.

But the problem with that is if you say that the defilements like greed, aversion, and delusion aren't real, that they're not even defilements, it's like saying that when there's dirt in your house, it's not really dirt. It's just a natural part of the floor and a natural part of the wall, so you're just going to leave it there. You'll never know what it's like to have a really clean house.

The whole purpose in having a teaching on defilement is to realize that the mind could be a lot brighter than it is. Maybe it's true that a dirty house is natural, but a clean house is possible, and it's a much nicer house to live in. In the same way, the Buddha's saying that a clean mind is possible, and a much nicer mind to be with as well. So instead of taking the word "defilement" as an affront to your dignity, think of it as a very useful concept for living well.

After all, there are parts of the mind that get in the way of practicing virtue, there are parts that get in the way of practicing concentration, get in the way of practicing discernment. Those are defilements. If they're cleaned away from the mind, the mind's going to be a lot brighter.

How do you clean them away? One, you learn how to gain a sense of distance from them. The reason they have power over us is that they disguise themselves as us. Greed comes in, we assume that it's *our* greed, it's the way we feel about that particular object we want and it's *our* wanting. The same with anger: *We're* angry. Delusion sneaks up on us and doesn't even let us know it's there, but it's there, and we identify with whatever deluded ideas it may bring.

This is where the concept of the committee of the mind is very useful. All too often we see the committee of the mind as a problem, in that the mind has so many desires, so many different wants, and there so much conflict inside. All those different voices can often get in the way of getting the mind to settle down and be still. But the positive side of having a committee is that you can identify with the discernment, you can identify with the mindfulness, you can identify with all the other good voices in the mind. That allows you to step back from the voices of greed, aversion, and delusion, to

look at them from the outside.

After all, when you look at anger in somebody else, it's obviously a problem. You look at greed in somebody else, it's obviously a weakness. So you want to be able to see your own anger and your own greed in the same way.

This is why we develop the path. We develop all the different strengths of the mind that the Buddha talks about. Conviction in the Buddha's awakening, conviction in the power of action; persistence in trying to give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones; mindfulness to keep all this in mind, so that the mind can get into concentration and have a sense of its home where it can stay apart from the greed, aversion, and delusion; and then the discernment to take them apart.

When greed comes in, you want to be able to see why you're attracted to it. The same with anger, lust, jealousy: These things all have their attractive side. If you don't admit that to yourself, you'll never be able to get past them. But you also have to see the drawbacks. It's in seeing the drawbacks and weighing them against the attractive side: That's when you can finally get past them, because you can see that they really are stains on the mind. They really obscure a lot of the clarity that could be there in the mind. You're better off without them.

The problem, of course, is that we tend to feed off of their allure, thinking that the allure is what gives spice to life. That's the flavor that we get from the greed or the aversion or the lust or the jealousy. So we need a sense of well-being in the concentration as our food while we peel away from our old feeding habits. We realize that the spices have been hiding the fact that we've been feeding on dirt.

It's like that *Far Side* cartoon where the cows are in the pasture and one of them jerks her head up and says, "Hey, wait a minute. This is grass! We've been eating grass!" Well, we've been eating dirt. We've been eating all the stains in the mind. But because they're dressed up with a little bit of spice, we think they're really good. So now we've got to feed the mind on better things.

The food of concentration may not be as exciting, it may not be as spicy, but it is nourishing and does strengthen the mind. With that strength, we can withstand some of the appeal of those defilements. We can step back from them and say, "This really is dirt in the mind." We're ready to start cleaning it away—learning to see where we perceive the attraction, where we perceive the need to identify with these things, and learning to question that.

A lot of discernment lies in questioning things we don't usually question, things we simply assume to be unavoidable. The mind's going to have to have these emotions, we assume. Well, why? Why do we have to run with them? When they do come up, why do we have to embroider them further?

It's not the case that they simply arise full-blown on their own. We're implicated in the process. A little something comes into the mind, a little stirring, and depending on

what we want at that point, we identify the stirring as that thing and then we run with it. So you have to question the perceptions you apply to these things.

When something gets you angry, take the perception apart. Is what that person has said or done really all that bad? And even if it is all that bad, is anger justified? Or rather: Is it helpful? If it's something you really have to deal with, anger's going to get in the way because you're not going to be able to see things clearly. The same with greed: You start doing all kinds of foolish things under the power of greed. The same with lust. These things make us their slaves.

So however you perceive the drawbacks—whether it's just as a stain on the mind that obscures its clarity, or something that comes in and turns you into a slave, whatever you can see to realize that these are things you don't want to get involved with—recognize that they're there and learn how to pull yourself away from them.

When the Buddha said that the mind is luminous and the defilements come in and visit, he's not saying that we have a pure nature to begin with. If our nature were pure, then we wouldn't go for the defilements anyhow. The luminous quality of the mind means that there's a clarity to it, that you can actually see the things you're doing. You can begin to see that when you follow a particular unskillful state, these are the consequences. You can also see when the unskillful state arises in the mind. You can start seeing the stages by which it comes, in the place where there's a little bit of allure and you go for the allure and then you swallow the whole hook along with the bait. It's this luminous quality of the mind that allows us to see these things, to step back from the greed or the aversion or the delusion or any of the other subsidiary defilements.

And then we benefit. We realize that the mind is a lot cleaner than it was before, a lot brighter than it was before. It's less likely to be picked up by these things and dragged around. And that's when you see the benefit of the teachings. It's really good to be reminded again and again and again: greed, aversion, and delusion are stains on the mind. They're faults in the mind. And there's a way to get past them.

The fact that we can have different committee members in the mind allows us to step away from the unskillful ones. If the mind were totally one identity and it were defiled by nature, there would be nothing you could do. You'd have to wait for some help from outside. But the fact is that the mind does have that clarity, that luminous nature, where it can see what's going on inside. And the committee has skillful members that can be strengthened, so they can step back and view the defilements as alien, as something that doesn't have to be there, something that's intruded into the mind. All of this means you can do something about this yourself: You can clean out your mind.

So remember that the mind could be a lot brighter than it is, a lot happier than it is. Some people take that as a burdensome thought—that there's more work to be done—because they'd like to hear that there's nothing more they need to do. Which means that they just want to live with the dirt and tell themselves that it's not dirt. But they never

get to see what a really clean mind would be like.

The Buddha's telling you about your defilements, not to burden you with an extra unpleasant duty, but to provide you with an opening, a possibility where you could find what it's like to have a really good mind with a goodness that's so good, a cleanliness so clean, that you'll never need anything else.

So see the teaching on defilement as something that's really helpful and kind, and not as a personal affront. That'll allow you to get the most out of it.

Insight Is a Judgment Call

September 29, 2016

When the great ajaans were practicing in the forest, they were out there alone. What kept them going was the realization that they weren't really alone. They belonged to something much larger. They belonged to the culture of the noble ones. This is a culture you can join simply by adopting its values. And you want to remind yourself of those values, especially in this land of wrong view, because otherwise you start feeling lonely. You start feeling that you're the only person practicing and your values aren't in line with those of other people. And those people don't just sit by and watch neutrally. Most people try to push you in their direction: to do what they do, think the way they think. So think about how the noble ones would respond to that pressure. Ajaan Fuang's image one time was of people who have stepped in dog shit and then want to make sure everybody else steps in dog shit, too. You've got to think in those terms if you want your practice to survive.

So think about the values of the customs of the noble ones. There are four altogether. The first three have to do with contentment. You're content with whatever food, clothing, or shelter you get. You're not constantly thinking about ways to make the food better, or the clothing better, or the shelter better. There may be times when you feel that something's really lacking. But if these things serve their purpose—and this is one of the reasons why we have that reflection every evening to remember what that purpose is—then you've got enough.

You really don't need to be ambitious to make yourself large in the world, just for the sake of more food, more clothing, or more shelter. Even if you have a thousand sets of clothing, you can only wear one at a time. And that thought frees you. It frees you from all the extra work you'd have to do to get things that are basically extraneous, that are there only for show.

That allows you to focus on the most important of the customs of the noble ones, which is to delight in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. In other words, you want to make yourself *want* to do these things. Sometimes it doesn't happen naturally, even when you're practicing. There are times when the momentum begins to wear out. You need to give yourself pep talks, to remind yourself of why you're doing this and why it's a good thing.

You're learning to make a judgment call as to what's worth doing, what's not, and taking delight in what is really worth doing. The mind calculates these things all the time. There's a part of the brain that keeps saying, "Is this worth it, the energy that goes here? Or would the energy go better there?" That's a basic function of the mind. The

problem is that it often *mal*functions, based either on our own past experiences or on our own lack of clarity as to what the results of our actions will be. So a lot of the training is learning how to read our actions so that we can make a better judgment call as to what's worth doing, what's not.

Wisdom begins with those questions: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" Look at everything in terms of actions—this reality that we're trapped in, that we've created, that we keep on creating through our own fabrication. You could say it's a web of fabrication. It sounds like a web of lies, which is not quite what the word "fabrication" means here: It's simply something that's put together. We're constantly assembling it. And it's constantly falling apart. So we keep assembling it some more. We're driven to do this because we like to feed on these things. We think it's worth the effort that goes into it, so that we can get the food that comes out of our efforts.

The problem is that sometimes we're impatient. We want the food right now, so we're not too picky about what we get right now. As long as we get something right now, we're happy. This is one of the reasons why, as we practice, we try to find alternative sources of food, try to get another visceral pleasure, aside from the pleasure of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. We need the pleasure of concentration as a substitute. As the Buddha once said, you can know all the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you don't have an alternative pleasure, such as the pleasure of right concentration, then you're going to go back to feeding off all the old things that you told yourself were bad, because you don't see the alternative. It's not immediately there. So the pleasure of concentration is one of the ways we keep ourselves sustained on the path.

The Buddha, when he was describing the noble eightfold path, at one point called right concentration the main factor, while the rest were the auxiliary or helping factors. Right concentration is where you get to use pleasure in a skillful way, a pleasure you gain while staying focused on the breath. But at the same time, you learn an important lesson about pleasure: that if you go running after the pleasure, you're going to lose the cause. So you stick with the cause and enable the pleasure to develop on its own. And it'll do its work. You don't have to gobble it down. It'll suffuse through the body, nourish whatever immediate need you feel for a sense of well-being. And that puts you in a better place to make a better judgment about what's worth doing, what's not.

When the Buddha talks about developing discernment from those first two questions, a lot of it focuses on actions. There's the discernment that comes with learning how to get yourself to do things you don't like to do, but you know are going to give good long-term results; and the discernment that gets you to stop yourself from doing things that you like to do but are going to cause long-term harm. This kind of discernment is practical. Strategic. And we develop it how? By being virtuous, by doing virtuous things, by being generous, by giving.

And we gain discernment by acting. The Buddha recommends good ways to act: He says that if you act this way, you're going to get good results. You put it to the test and you find that it's true. There is a sense of well-being. When you give something, the well-being that you gain inside is worth much more than the object you gave. And it's much more yours. It becomes your kamma now. It becomes a habit, a quality of the mind.

The same with virtue, when you really put virtue into practice by following the precepts: Try to make it an absolute promise to yourself that you're going to stick to these precepts. You catch yourself about to do things that you used to do and you used to think were okay, but you stop. You realize that they have their drawbacks. And again, you have to learn how to think strategically so that you can stick to the precept not to lie and not to kill, even in situations where it's difficult. But you learn, with time, that you're a happier person.

So you gain discernment by learning how to act properly. This makes you more and more sensitive to the role you play in shaping your experience. Then you finally get to the subtler levels of discernment, for example, the Buddha's questionnaire on inconstancy, stress, and not-self.

The teaching on not-self is not meant to make you come to the conclusion that there is no self. It's meant to get you to ask a question: Is it worth it in this situation to create a sense of self? To make a "me" or a "mine"? You learn how to apply those questions strategically. In other words, while you're developing concentration, you don't apply them to the concentration. You apply them to the things that would pull you away.

When you're trying to be virtuous, when you're trying to be generous, again, you apply those questions to things that would pull you away from these practices. It's only when the path is fully developed that you apply those questions to everything. Notice, it's a value judgment. You ask yourself, "Is it worth saying, 'This is me. This is mine'?" Insight is always a judgment call. And you want to learn how to delight in making more and more skillful judgments.

I was talking on this theme a few days ago to a Buddhist group in the Bay Area. A woman came up afterwards and said, "Gee, thinking about how my actions shape my life: That's putting a whole new perspective on things. It means my life isn't shaped by my DNA." And my answer was, "Well, yes. This is what the Buddha's talking about. You shape your life." He's putting you in a position of power. The question is, are you going to maintain that position of power or are you going to succumb to the parts of the mind that don't want to put all the effort into being skillful? If you try to maintain that position of power, you're following the culture of the noble ones. This is one way of motivating yourself: taking a sense of joy, delighting in what you're doing. You can motivate yourself through heedfulness. You can motivate yourself through skillful shame, skillful pride, compassion: compassion for others, compassion for yourself. Or you could do it simply through the pride that comes from learning how to do something

skillfully: to make more and more skillful judgment calls.

Another person that evening said to me, "You're making it sound all very ordinary and psychological." Well, that's how it starts. You start by looking at yourself as an agent and asking yourself, "How can I be a more skillful agent? How can I make my decisions more skillfully?" And you pursue this more and more to deeper levels, subtler levels, where you find that what you're taking apart is not so ordinary.

You get to a very deep level and the effect it has on your experience of the senses gets very radical. It opens you up to another dimension. There is a dimension that is unfabricated: It doesn't require that you keep tending to it and keep feeding it or keep feeding off it. Everything is unconditioned in that dimension and it doesn't require all this constant care. It doesn't require an agent. And opening up to that dimension is very radical. The final acts on the path that allow you to do that are judgment calls as well.

So if you're going to learn how to get to that radical level, you have to first develop the ordinary, everyday level of learning to be more skillful in how you speak and how you think and how you act, looking again and again at what you're doing: remembering what you should be doing and looking to see if you actually are doing it. Like the lesson we had about the clothesline today. You remember which side of the robe to expose to the sun and then you check to make sure that that's the side of the robe you're exposing. And then you look at the results. The robe doesn't fade so quickly. Simple things like that, but you move from the simple things to the subtler ones. And there's a greater sense of self-esteem that comes as you learn to make more and more precise and skillful judgment calls in all the areas of your life.

So remember, as you go through the day, that everything you do is a choice. Everything you do involves intention. And if you learn how to look carefully at them—these intentions and these choices—and stick with the desire to be as skillful as possible, to be a member of that noble culture, the culture of the noble ones, you find that you actually do take more and more joy and more and more delight in developing what's skillful, abandoning what's unskillful, and the results go deeper and deeper.

As Luang Pu Dune once said, "The practice is one thing clear through." He didn't say what that one thing was. It's actually a cluster of things, but they all work together. One of them is this ability to make better and better judgment calls. That's what your discernment is, that's what insight is. It's a practice that, on whatever level, you notice that you're making a decision, making a choice, and in trying to do that skillfully, you see how the path and all the areas of your life connect.

The Train Trestle

December 30, 2016

Put aside the world outside for a while and focus on the world inside. What have you got here? You've got the body—particularly, you've got the breath—you've got feelings, and you've got the mind. You want to bring those all together in a way that's nourishing for all three.

Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Some aspects of the breathing will be more obvious than others. Focus on the areas that are most obvious, or the ones that you feel most sensitive to. There's a spot in the body that you usually use to mark when the breath has come in enough, so that you know, "Now it's time for it to go out. Now it's gone out enough. It's time for it to come back in." Find that spot. If there's any tension or tightness around it, let it loosen up. This way, the breath immediately relates to feelings, which you begin to see don't just come and go on their own. You do things to induce them. There are certain limits to what you can do—this has to do with past kamma—but within the limits of what you've got here, you want to make the best use of the potentials you've got.

As for the mind, is it willing to stay here right now? Sometimes, if it's not staying, the problem is with the breath or with the feelings. Sometimes it's with the thoughts going on in the mind: things left over from the day. If you find a lot of left-over stuff, sort through it a bit. Imagine the Buddha's point of view, and think of what he would have to say about the issues that are coming up in your mind right now, how he might advise you to take a larger view, let them go. Then you're ready to get back with the breath.

What you're doing here is creating what's called a state of becoming. Becoming is a sense of a particular world of experience and your identity in that world. Right now, you're the meditator and the relevant world is the world of your body right here, together with your awareness of the body. This world is based on a desire: the desire to get the mind to settle down, to find some peace in the present moment. And based on that desire, you have to adjust things.

You adjust the breath. You adjust your thoughts. You adjust your feelings. All that's called fabrication. It's how we create our inner world. It's how we create our outer worlds as well. This is one of the reasons why getting the mind in a good state of concentration like this, with the proper understanding, is such a good laboratory. You look at the world outside and it seems pretty confusing. You say, "How could I have created this?" You didn't create everything, but you created your experience of it.

And the problem is that worlds don't just sit there. They move. And you don't just sit there, either. You move, too. You find that you can't stay in a particular world, so you move on to another one, and then another one, because the mind is constantly trying to find someplace to stay in worlds that keep collapsing and disintegrating. Sometimes it moves out of desperation, sometimes it's feeling threatened, so it tends to piece things together pretty quickly, pretty haphazardly, not knowing what it's doing. That's why we find ourselves in situations where we can't imagine why we got there or how we would have wanted to be there. We didn't want to be there. Our desires were pointing someplace else, but they were confused. Confused and ignorant.

So we're trying to learn how to do this process with more knowledge and more skill. At the same time, in creating a state of concentration like this, we give ourselves a place to step back out of other worlds. You notice this very clearly as you get distracted by something. You're in another world. There's kind of a blacking out, and suddenly you're someplace else. But you can remind yourself, "I'm meditating." You can pull yourself back. You've got another place to return to: a place that's more solid, that's not collapsing around you all the time.

There is some impermanence here, some inconstancy, but relative to a lot of other things in life, this state of concentration is pretty constant. It allows you to put down your guard a bit. As the Buddha said, settle in here. Indulge in the pleasure of the concentration, because the mind needs that sense of pleasure. Otherwise, it's going to go out looking for other things to wolf down. Allow the sense of pleasure to develop and let it spread throughout the whole body. See if you can get it to spread to places you haven't been thinking about for a while, areas that you might tend to forget.

This is why it's good to have a systematic way of going through the body with a checklist. But even those systems can miss some things. So cast your gaze around and see what needs to be soothed in the body, energized in the body, or relaxed in the body, so that this becomes a good place to stay. You're going to try to move into this world, and it's like moving into a house. You want to make it a home, a place where you can feel at your ease. And while you're doing this, you learn a lot about how the mind builds homes.

That was the Buddha's image after his awakening. He realized that he had had a house builder in his mind that kept on building new houses, new houses, again and again. It fashioned new houses as the old houses collapsed, and moved into the new ones. But then the new ones collapsed, too—sometimes even when they were still under construction—so he had to build more. And finally, on awakening, he realized he had reached a state that wasn't built and wasn't going to collapse. He didn't need the house builder anymore. This is a useful image to apply to your life. See how you're building houses. Are you building them on sand or are you building them on solid rock? What are they exposed to?

Some houses are exposed to more dangers than others. This is another reason why

you want to have a good place inside, because it's a lot less exposed. At the same time, you can see more clearly this process of how you fabricate things. You see which thoughts, which feelings, and which physical sensations you tend to latch onto and what you create out of them. This way, you learn to do it with more knowledge, more finesse.

Think about samsara. An image that springs to mind is one of those cartoons where Bugs Bunny is in a train going over a big railroad trestle over a huge chasm. As the train goes along, the trestle's collapsing behind him. So he's got to keep going, going, and going. Where samsara is different from this image is that in the cartoon, the part of the trestle ahead of him is already there, whereas when we're going through life, some of the things that we're going to be running to are already determined, but a lot of them are not. We're scrambling to build the train trestle ahead of us, hoping that it'll reach the other side. And all too often, we do it with greed, aversion, delusion, envy, jealousy: all kinds of unskillful mind states, along with that sense of being threatened by the collapse of things behind us. So we tend to do a shoddy job, which is why we find ourselves in worlds that we wouldn't like to be in.

So here, as we meditate, we have a chance to get a better sense of how the mind fabricates things. Again, it's not total world creation. In other words, you can't create something out of nothing. You've got raw material coming in from past kamma, which sometimes can place severe limitations on what you can do. But you always have the choice to do something skillful with it. That choice is always there. It's simply that we're latching onto other things that make us push the skillful alternative aside. If you give the mind a more solid place like this, you can do your work with clearer vision, a lot more patience, but at the same time, you can be more efficient in how you put together the right way to be in a particular world.

So even though there may be some situations where there's going to be a lot of pain or a lot of confusion, you don't have to suffer from the pain or be confused about what you're doing. That puts you in a better position to help yourself—and other people, too. Because if everything in your life is going up in flames and you try to help somebody else who's going up in flames, sometimes you just add more fire to theirs. But if you're in a cool, safe place, you can pull those other people out—to whatever extent they want to be pulled.

So this is not a selfish process. Our worlds intersect, so the way you create your world, if it's done with skill, will have a good influence on other people. We're here to get to know this aspect of the mind that's building houses, building railroad trestles, so that we can have better and better places to move into until eventually we get to where the trestle reaches the other side. That's when we're safe. Until then, it's going to keep collapsing behind us.

Even as we sit here meditating, things are collapsing behind us. Worlds where we've been in the past: They're gone. Even the past moment is gone. Forever. We have to look

at what worlds we're creating right now and what worlds they're going to lead to, on into the future. As the Buddha said, we're all on a path of one sort or another, and those paths have their different destinations. All too often, we don't realize what the destination is. Some people get themselves on the path to the lower destinations. They haven't chosen that destination, but the path they've chosen is going to take them there. It's out of ignorance that they're headed in that direction. This is why it's good to have the Dhamma to give us a clear sense of what paths there are in the world and what kinds of actions lead in what direction so we can choose wisely and construct something that'll take us to safety.

The Burning House

May 4, 2016

We focus on the present moment so that we give the mind a sense of feeling at home here. This is the place where you belong. Now, for most of us, we don't live here. We live in the past, we live in the future, and come running through the present moment just for a moment, like a kid who doesn't spend much time at home. He wants something from home, comes running in, and then he goes running out again. But right here is where a lot of decisions are being made. And, as life goes on, this awareness right here with the body is going to become a bigger and bigger issue. As the body begins to break down, illness comes, pain comes. Soon you find yourself less and less able to do things you used to be able to do before. The mind gets more and more roped into being here, much against its will.

But if you learn how to settle in here well in advance, you have a sense of how the awareness in the present moment can relate to the body in such a way that it doesn't have to suffer from the issues in the body. That way, aging, illness, and death are not much of a problem. They're simply issues of the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer. So you want to get this moment, the present moment, more and more under your control. You want to get the mind under control. You want to get more and more familiar with the territory. It's as if someone is threatening to mug you at a certain corner, so you go down and look at the corner and you figure out: Where are the escape routes that allow you to run away? How can you escape? How can you get through safely?

So get to know this spot. Get to know how thoughts arise in the present moment, how they take shape, how they get nourished by your attention, and how you can starve some thoughts if you find that they're unhealthy or unhelpful. There are lots of things to learn here.

But even though this is our home, we won't be spending all of our time at home. There are times when you have to think about the past or about the future. Someone was telling me the other day that they heard someone say that if you're thinking about the past and future, you're suffering; if you're in the present moment, you're not suffering. Well, that's not the case. It makes it sound as if, to avoid suffering, you can simply not think as you hang out in the present moment. That may avoid a few kinds of suffering, but that's not how the Buddha taught. He taught people to think, and to think in the long-term: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom and discernment.

So to be discerning, you've got to think out to the long term as to what is really

important. And that gives you a perspective on the present moment. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the importance of being right in the present moment—and it's interesting that he doesn't talk about it that much—but when he does, it's because he realized that there are things that have to be done before you die if you want to die well—in other words, to die with skill.

You don't know how much time you've got. You can spend a lot of time planning for your old age, and then it turns out that you don't live till old age. Something happens before then. So you want to be ready to go at any time. It's like knowing that there's a fire off in the distance and you might be called on to evacuate at any moment. You need to have your valuables packed. But you can't take all your valuables. You have to figure out which things are important and you have to keep them ready at hand so that when the time comes to go, you pick up the bag and you're gone. You've got all the important things with you.

But when you think about the long term, how does that reflect back on the present moment? It points to what's important in the present moment. The shape of your mind is important. When anything comes up in the mind that could pull you away, saying, "We'll have a little entertainment right now," or "Think about this because you like this or that": You have to look at the long-term consequences. In other words, the Buddha is not telling us *not* to think about the past or the future, he's telling us *how* to think about the past and the future. In terms of the past, he wants you to be mindful, to remember the good Dhamma lessons you've learned from the past. That includes not only what you've heard or read in terms of the Dhamma, but also what you've learned from your own actions. What kinds of actions lead to harm? What kinds of actions don't lead to harm? You learn how to take responsibility for looking at what's going on—and not just "going on," but also looking at how you've shaped your life and trying to learn lessons from what you've done as to how better to shape it now and in the future.

This directs your thoughts from the past to the future. The future doesn't end with death. It goes beyond, and it goes beyond in a particular way. There are some religions that say that, after you die, it's either eternal damnation or eternal bliss. But those teachings don't really encourage you to look at your actions, because there is no human action that could possibly earn eternal damnation or earn eternal bliss. So you're left hanging. And it all sounds very arbitrary. Somebody else out there is making the decisions, which means that you're not making the decisions, which doesn't encourage you to learn from your actions.

But the Buddha doesn't teach that way. He teaches another way. He says that your actions do shape the future, and the results in the future are going to be proportional to your actions. Yet a lot of things go into deciding what that proportion is. And if you don't really get your act together, the process is just going to keep going on, and on, and on, up and down, up and down. As he said, it's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end; sometimes it lands on the other end; sometimes it lands

flat in the middle. If we just follow the line of one person's many lifetimes, it seems pretty random.

But when you see the larger picture, you realize that your actions are the factor determining the long-term course. This is why it's good to reflect on the past actions that you've done—the ones that had good results, the ones that had bad results—and ask yourself what lessons you can learn as you head into the future.

So it's not just being in the present moment, or hanging out in the present moment, that counts as practice. Learning how to think properly about the past and think properly about the future: Those are important aspects of the practice, too. They put the present moment into perspective. Because if you don't get the right perspective on the present moment, there can be a lot of suffering. Even just trying to be right here in the present moment—if you haven't learned how to master the present moment—can entail a lot of suffering right here. There's the suffering of the aggregates, there's the suffering of clinging and craving. These are things that we have to sort out. Once we *have* sorted them out, that's a real treasure. That's a valuable that you want to make sure is in your bag so that when the time to evacuate comes, you've got good things to see you through.

A lot of people just stuff their little bag with all kinds of garbage, whatever's at hand, and blame all their suffering on the fact that the fire is going to come. Well, the fires of aging, illness, and death are coming, burning us all the time. That's not something we can change. What we *can* change is what we take with us, what we salvage from this burning house.

So even though concentration provides us with a home here in the present moment, it's a burning house. For the time being, as we work on our concentration, we try to find a room to stay where it's cool, where things are fireproof, or relatively fireproof, so we can figure out what's going on in the rest of the house. But there will come a time when you can't even stay in this room anymore. So where do you go?

This is one of the reasons why, when we work on concentration practice, we try to get ultimately to a sense of just awareness in and of itself. In the beginning, a lot of the concentration is a matter of learning how to stay with the breath, to get to the point where the mind and the breath—your awareness and the breath—seem to be one. Wherever there's awareness, there's breath; wherever there's breath, there's awareness. But you don't want to stay at that stage. You want to move on to the next stage, which is learning to see that, as these things sit together for a while, they begin to separate naturally. It's easiest to see when you get the mind still to the point where the breath is actually still as well, and the sense of the body begins to dissolve. Then you've got awareness just on its own. When you learn to maintain that sense of awareness on its own, you come to see, "This is how the body impinges on your awareness in the present moment, but then there's the awareness itself, which is something separate."

You first see this clearly at times when the sense of the body goes, but it's really useful to be able to maintain that sense of awareness as something separate even when your awareness of the body is there as well. That's a much safer home. It, too, has its burning edges, but it's a lot safer. And it's by hanging onto the awareness that you make sure that you're in a much better position to notice what's coming and what's going, how the mind latches onto things, and how it doesn't have to latch onto things. That's when you've got a real treasure. And it'll be found here in the present moment. You're not going to find it in the past or in the future.

But when you learn how to think properly about the past and think properly about the future, it really helps focus you on what's important in the present moment. We talk about developing alertness as to what's going on in the present. But its focus is not just on whatever's happening in the present. Its focus is on what you're doing. Why? Because that's the lesson coming from the past and aiming at the future: You've got to really focus on what you're doing because that's the most important thing happening in the present moment, for the sake of your happiness now and on into the future. We're not here just to be aware of whatever impinges on your awareness, because there are lots of things in the present moment that are really irrelevant to the big issues: the fact that the present moment is burning, this home in the present moment is burning, and you've got to develop the skills that enable you not to get burned.

So think of the practice as an all-around practice. We're not just practicing in the present moment. We're also learning how to engage the past and engage the future, so that the lessons of the past don't get lost, and so that the future does hold out the prospect that someday you'll find something lying beyond past, present, and future. That's the place that's really safe. The Buddha doesn't talk about it as being a home, because home is an area where you go to find shelter from something. But when you're there, there's no need for shelter. In the meantime, though, you've got to keep this present moment shelter as solid as you can. Because this is where the work that needs to be done can get done well.

Breath vs. Distraction

January 28, 2016

Just sitting here with nothing to do is very ordinary. It's so ordinary that the mind doesn't stay here very easily. It seems ordinary, but if you learn how to ask questions about it, you find that the more questions you ask, the stranger it gets. You've got this body, and you've got the mind that's aware. What are they doing here together? How do they relate to each other? A famous Zen master, Dogen, recommended asking questions like this: Is the body sitting in the mind, or is the mind sitting in the body? Which is the container for the other one? Or does there have to be a container? The reason for asking these questions is to start probing around into your assumptions about how you relate to your body, how you relate to your mind.

And you can move your awareness fully into the body itself, this breath that we're focusing on. What is the breath? Viewed from the outside, people say that it's the air coming in and out through the nose, going into the lungs, and then coming back out again, but how does it feel to you inside?—like that old Peanuts cartoon where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel my hands; they're cold," and she says, "Yes, they *are* cold, but how do you know they're cold when you're inside them?"

The way you look to people outside is one thing, but the way you experience the body from the inside, the mind from the inside, is something else. And it's good to explore this area inside to see how it's not quite what you thought it might be. That gives you something to get interested in as you sit here.

Like the breath energy: We say that it flows through the body. But does it flow through the solid parts? In other words, are the solid parts there first, so that you have to pump the breath into them? Or does your awareness of the solid parts actually come to you through the breath? If it weren't for the breath, you wouldn't know they were there. So think of the breath energy as being there first.

Thinking in this way can be very useful. If there's a pain in one part of the body, you may find yourself putting up a little wall of tension right around it, to contain it there as you breathe in, and the breath energy seems to stop at the wall. As you do that, the circulation of the blood, the energies in the body, get blocked and discombobulated. But if you remember that the breath comes first, you reason that it shouldn't be the case that anything else in the body should block the breath. Think of the breath as already there, and your awareness of the breath is there prior to your awareness of anything else.

So learn how to ask yourself a few strange questions about what it's like to just be

sitting here, breathing. That's one of your first defenses against distracting thoughts, because you're experimenting, finding things out, asking questions that you've never thought to ask before. Even if you *have* thought of asking them before, you can still explore. There's a lot to explore in the relationship among the body and the mind and the breath.

That way, when a distracting thought comes up, it doesn't have the pull it used to have, because it's not as interesting, because you have something fascinating here to explore. If you're sitting here with nothing to do and nothing to think about and no questions about what's going on right now, then you start asking questions like, "Well, what about last week? And what about next week? And what about what I'm going to do when I leave here?" And all of a sudden those questions become a lot more interesting than the breath. But if you can tune into this level of interest with the breath, then you find that questions about last week and next week are really not so absorbing after all. Here it is, your own relationship to your own body, and it's something you haven't really explored. Your own relationship to your own mind and your own breath: Here's your chance to get to know these things.

This way, if a distracting thought comes, it's easy to follow through with the Buddha's first instructions for dealing with distracting thoughts, which is to replace them with a more skillful thought—in this case, coming back to the breath because there's still more to explore.

Now, if those thoughts have a pull that keeps pulling you back, that's a sign that you're attracted to them for some reason or another, which is why his second method of dealing with distracting thoughts is to try to see their drawbacks. And a lot of this has to do with kamma. As the Buddha said, the thoughts that your mind tends to go to bend the mind in their direction, and you find yourself acting under their influence.

All too often, the mind's excuse is, "Well, nobody knows what I'm thinking, and it doesn't have any impact on the world outside, so I should be free to think anything I want." And you *are* free, but is that the best use of your freedom? If a thought comes up in the mind, ask yourself, "If I thought this thought for 24 hours, where would it lead me?" Remind yourself of how most of the distracting thoughts that come up in the mind, the ones that have a lot of pull, are things you've thought many times before. They're like old movies. You know what Lauren Bacall is going to say. You know what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. So why do you keep watching them? Of course, in the case of a lot of these thoughts, the actors are not Lauren Bacall or Humphrey Bogart. They're just a bunch of amateurs, and the acting is horrible. So what's the pull? What's the interest?

And it is important that you think about the consequences of your thinking: "Where is this thought going to lead you?" I've been reading a series of anecdotes about Ajaan Chah recently, things that haven't been translated into English yet, and there's one where a monk comes to him and complains that as he sits and meditates, thoughts of

lust take over his mind, and he doesn't know what to do. So Ajaan Chah says, "That's easy. When the next *wan phra* comes"—that's the day when the lay people come to the monastery for the Lunar Sabbath—"when the next *wan phra* comes, we'll have you get up in the sermon seat and have you describe to all the lay people out there all of your sexual fantasies from the past week." The monk suddenly found it a lot easier to put those thoughts aside.

In other words, if you realize that your thoughts have consequences, you have to ask yourself, "Is this where I want to go?" Then it's a lot easier to apply the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self to those thoughts to see that you really don't want to go there. You want to step out. And this is what the breath is for. It gives you a place to step out of those thoughts.

Our problem is that when a thought comes, we tend to jump right into it. This is what the Buddha calls becoming. A thought world appears in your mind, and we go into it 100%. So we have to learn how to counteract that tendency, because sometimes you jump into a thought world only to find that it's pretty bad. And if you're used to jumping in and wallowing in a thought world, then it's harder to get out, but if you can have a sense of the breath as your safe place and the thoughts being less real than the breath, then it's easier to pull out. It's like being in a bad dream and realizing, "Hey, this is a dream; I don't need to keep dreaming this." All the concerns about being at the airport, and you can't get to the plane, and your luggage isn't there, and all these other things: You realize, "Hey, wait a minute, this is a dream," and then the concerns about luggage and whatnot, they're gone.

So learn to see your thoughts as that ephemeral and the issues in the thoughts as that unreal, because you've got bigger issues to deal with. You've got a mind that's out of control. You've got to do something about it, and here's your chance to step out.

Notice how the Buddha lists these ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. First, you simply give yourself something better to think about. Then you look at the drawbacks of the thoughts that otherwise would pull you away. When you've seen the drawbacks, even if you have trouble not getting interested in those things, it makes it a lot easier to do the next two steps, one of which is to just ignore the thoughts. In other words, they're there, but you don't have to go after them. The thoughts don't destroy the breath. The breath is still here. So even though all kinds of dialogues and shouting matches are going on in your head right now, you don't have to get involved. You've realized that these things have drawbacks, so why get involved with them? Even though there may be a tendency for the mind to keep spinning out in that direction, you don't have to go spinning with it. The breath is here.

It's like a crazy person coming to talk to you. If you try to chase the crazy person away by arguing with him, the crazy person's got you. So you pretend that the crazy person's not there. You hear him and you know what he's saying—and he's going to say all kinds of outrageous things to get to you—but you have to be firm in your resolve:

You're not going to get involved. After a while, he'll go away.

Even if he doesn't, you've got another trick up your sleeve, which is to breathe through the tension in the body that corresponds to the thought. The more you get sensitive to what the breath can do and how the breath relates to your thoughts, you'll begin to realize that for a thought to stay in the mind, there has to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It's your marker. So you can go through all the different parts of the body and ask yourself, "When this thought comes, what tenses up?" See what happens if you can locate that tension and release it. It may not necessarily be where you expect it to be. It's not always in the head. Sometimes it's in an arm. Sometimes it's in a knee. It can be almost anyplace.

If that technique doesn't work, then just grit your teeth and, as the Buddha said, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and resolve, "I am not going to think that thought." And of course the object of your meditation at that point is the thought, "I am not going to think that other thought," which may not be the blissful, calm state of dealing with the breath that you want, but if it's necessary, that's what you do. If you think of these different methods as tools, this is your sledgehammer.

A variation of this one is to have a meditation word that you just repeat very quickly in your mind, *buddhobuddhobuddho,* rapid-fire, really fast. Think of all the cells in your body getting involved in the *buddhobuddho.* Keep that up for a while until the desire to go after that thought dissolves away. Then you can go back to the breath.

What this all comes down to is that you make the breath as interesting as possible. Learn to develop an interest in what's going on right here, right now. You've got this body. You've got this mind. It's really strange: How can this mind, this awareness, be related to this lump of flesh? What's the connection? And which part of the lump of flesh are you aware of first? It turns out that it's the breath. It's not the lump; it's the energy. Keep that perception in mind, and see how it helps you relate to the body in a new way, and how it helps you relate to your mind in a new way as well. See the drawbacks of thoughts that would pull you into greed, aversion, delusion, or sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. Have a strong sense that these things could take over your life if you're not careful, and the other techniques for dealing with distracting thoughts will come easily. You've shifted the balance of power inside so that you'll come out on top.

Centered

January 24, 2017

The Pali word *samadhi* is usually translated as concentration. I know at least one teacher, though, who objects to that translation on the grounds that we associate the idea of being concentrated on something with being tense. The spot where we're staying concentrated is a concentrated spot of tension. As he points out, that's not the quality we're trying to develop at all.

There are other ways, though, of thinking of concentration: that you're not focused on a spot outside of your center of who you think you are. The center's supposed to be right inside where you think you are—like a lens whose focal point is zero, inside the lens itself. It's a different kind of concentration. Just think of it as *being centered.* And the quality that the Buddha recommends is eventually one where your awareness fills the whole body, and every part of the body has almost equal importance.

It's like the concentration you use when you're playing a video game, and the enemy could appear at any point on the screen. Your awareness has to be spread out to the whole screen, giving equal importance to every pixel, so that as soon as the enemy appears—no matter where—you can detect him and zap him in time.

Another comparison is the way trackers go through the forest: They're looking for signs of animals who've been there. And they can't focus only on the ground. They have to focus also on the leaves of the trees, the branches that might be broken. The signs of animals having passed by can be anywhere, so the trackers need what they call "scatter-shot" concentration. In other words, your concentration is spread out in all directions, while your awareness is centered *inside,* so that no one spot in your outside range of vision is getting more attention than others. Everything is equal. You're ready to pick up the signs wherever they are.

One way of developing this kind of concentration is to think of your awareness starting with your hands and your feet and then moving inward. Relax your hands. Relax the wrists. Go up the arms, the shoulders. Then start with your feet and come up from the bottom, through the legs, the pelvis, up the back. Bring your awareness into the area around the heart or into the area right where your field of vision seems to be centered. See if you can maintain a sense of being centered there, but at the same time maintaining the full range of where you've been—all connected together.

That's the kind of concentration the Buddha's talking about, where you're one with the object, which in this case is the whole body. It's not like you're sitting in one spot of the body watching the breath in another spot of the body. You're sitting in the middle of

the breath, and the breath is bathing you on all sides. And think of it, as it comes in, as being totally unobstructed: It can come in, go out, with a sense of ease. You're centered, but there's a sense of ease. You're not using tension to hold yourself there. There's a *little* bit of tension, but not much.

Because, after all, we're trying to create a state of mind that we can maintain for long periods of time. If there's a lot of tension in maintaining it, it's not going to last. Your strength will wear out; you'll start getting tired of it. And instead of being nourishing and refreshing, the concentration will become tiresome. But if you can think of all the scattered tentacles of your awareness coming back into the center and leaving everything on the periphery very relaxed, it creates a kind of stability that's easy to maintain. It may not be easy to get used to this in the beginning, especially if you're the kind of person who likes to be focused just on one point. But this type of concentration is longer-lasting, once you master it.

So it's a talent worth developing. It changes your relationship to how you relate to the body, how you relate to events in the mind, because this broader concentration is very hard to knock over. If your concentration is one-pointed, it's very easy to lose, because once you move the point, the concentration's slipped. But with this, you've got a larger frame of reference. Things can come and go in the midst of that frame of reference, and you can see them, but they don't shake the frame. The frame is still there.

Like that image I sometimes use of being a screen on a window: Sounds go through the screen. Wind goes through the screen. But the screen doesn't get moved, and it doesn't obstruct the sounds and the wind from moving through. It's open: open to things outside but at the same time unaffected by them. The same observation can apply to your thoughts: Thoughts can come floating through the mind, but you don't latch onto them. You don't get interested in them. You're centered right here. You know they're there, but you don't really pay attention to them. Your center stays maintained right here. All your awareness gravitates to the center.

That's the quality of concentration we're looking for. Because only

in that kind of concentration can you spread the sense of ease, well-being, and rapture through the body. You've opened up all the channels as you've moved into the center. That gives a feeling of being connected to the breath energy fields, that everything is in harmony throughout the body.

This is an ideal state of mind for observing what's going on in the mind. Thoughts can arise and pass away, you see them arising and passing away, but you're not shaken by them. And you're not arising and passing away along with them. They have their ups and downs, but you stay still, here in the middle. And so the processes of thoughts, as they arise and pass away, become a lot clearer. You can see the machinations of the mind as it creates a thought. And as in the video game, you can zap the thoughts whenever and wherever they appear.

Because it's not that thoughts don't have a place in the body. For a thought to stay and to be the kind of thought that you can hold in mind for a while, there has to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body associated with it. That's the marker that keeps it there. Without that marker, thoughts can't stay. To hold them in mind, you have to hold them in the body, too. It's because of those little markers of tension that any work involving a lot of thinking and planning is really tiresome. You can sit at your desk and not really do any physical activity, but you come away very tired, because of all the tension that's been playing around in the body.

But when you get the mind centered like this, you can see the little pattern of tension as it comes together with the thought, and you can zap the pattern of tension, and the thought will dissolve. The more quickly you can do that, the more you see the early stages of how the mind constructs a thought—and you're less likely to be taken in by those processes. You can stop them when you see that they're arbitrary and are not going anywhere useful. If it turns out that the thought *is* something you need to think about, okay, you can think about it, but you can exert more control over where it's going, because you're staying with this larger framework of the entire body. You're not getting into the framework of the thought.

And if you lose the center, well, go back to the periphery again. Start with the hands, start with the feet, and move back into the center again. Or think of yourself backing into the body, if that's a helpful perception—anything to give the sense that you're here sitting surrounded by the breath, by the body. And your center is firm. Not firm through tension, firm simply through the fact that it's right in the middle, where everything gravitates on its own. That's the kind of center you can maintain for long periods of time.

Tapping into the Breath

July 17, 2017

Time and again, I say—when you're focusing on the breath—to remember that the breath is not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs, as it is a flow of energy in the body. One of those flows is the flow that allows the air to come in and out. The question is, "Where does that flow come from?" It doesn't come in with the in-breath. It actually comes from within the body itself. So if you're having trouble breathing comfortably, you might ask yourself, "Where does the breath actually start in the body?" Ajaan Lee lists what he calls the resting spots of the breath, such as the tip of the sternum or a spot just above the navel. And you can try any one of those. In fact, you'll find that there's no one spot where the breath starts—it starts from many—but you can focus on one and make the most of it. Say, for instance, that you're going to focus at the tip of the breastbone. You have to relax around that spot in order to allow the breath to spread from there in a way that actually feels good for the body. Because when we have different patterns of tension in the body, we tend to breathe with those patterns of tension and we just make things worse.

You have to remind yourself that there is a healthy breath in there. And you're going to allow it to move through the body by relaxing around it and noticing what feels good at that spot in the body. If you feel like you're breathing in too much or breathing out too much, be very sensitive and very on top of this. And you'll find that the breath really does become soothing. This is especially useful when you have a disease of one kind or another. You can use the soothing breath to work through a lot of the tension that may build up around the pain or the organ that's malfunctioning.

In the cases where there's unpleasant energy in some spot of the body, you may want to move to another spot first. Focus your attention there. And then, when you feel more confident, you can go to the spot that's actually malfunctioning and ask yourself, "Where is the healthy breath in here?" Notice the attitude not so much that you're going to *make* it healthy. You're just going to *allow* it. It's in this way that you learn how to use your perceptions—and how to change your perceptions so that they actually are conducive to settling down.

As you work with the breath in this way, you'll find that there are lots of different levels. It's like the water table at Wat Asokaram. They dug their wells in a very unlikely spot. Here they were at the edge of the ocean: a mangrove swamp, part of the tidal flats. And they would dig a well to use the water there. It didn't seem promising, but they found that there were different levels. You would dig down to a certain level and the water would be brackish. You'd dig down to another level and it would be fresh. And

then another level, and then it would be brackish again. It was like a layer cake, and the trick to digging the well was getting it just the right depth to tap into a layer that was good. In the same way, your body has lots of layers, lots of different energies moving around. Try to dig your well down to a spot where the energy is good. And then give it space to maximize it.

In Thai they have a phrase, "not being able to breathe with your full stomach," which means that there's tension or tightness in the abdomen and you don't feel like you're getting your full refreshment from the breath. Again, it's not so much the air going down into the abdomen. It's the question of whether the energy's allowed to move or propagate freely through the area of the abdomen so that every part feels nourished by that movement of energy. Now, your problem may not be in the abdomen, but you know where your difficult spots are in the body. So you can play with them. Remind yourself that there may be a layer in there that's actually healthy. Try to find it.

It's the same as when you've got problems with rapture. When rapture comes on, some people like it, some people don't. If you're one of the ones who don't, learn how to change your perception so you don't feel threatened by it. Some people feel threatened by it because they've had experiences with almost drowning, and it's a similar sensation: a feeling of intense fullness throughout the body. You have to remind yourself that you're surrounded by air. There's no problem. But even then, as you move the rapture through the body, it's good up to a point. There comes a point where you have to go beyond it. Here again, think of layers. Find the layer of energy that's not quite so active, that's calmer, with a sense of ease, and focus there. The movements of rapture can be in another layer for a while. As you're not focusing on them, after a while they begin to dissipate.

So think of the body as having many layers. And you're going to try to tune into the layer that's right for what you need right now. Some layers are more energizing. Some are more calming. But it's up to you to make your survey and to figure out how to relate to these energies. Here in English, we don't have a really good vocabulary for these energies. And even in Thai—where they talk about them and people tend to have a more intuitive sense of what we're talking about when we say breath energy—the vocabulary is not that large.

Ajaan Lee talks about breath energies that spin around in place, breath energies that move back and forth, the visiting breath, he calls it, which is the in-and-out breath. And then there's the still breath, a breath that doesn't move at all. That's in a layer there, too. He says the middling layers are the ones where we're working with the energies in the blood vessels and nerves, as we spread them through the different parts of the body. And they stay there in the body. They don't go in and out. They help the in-and-out breath, but they themselves don't go in and out. Those are the ones that you want to work with, because they're a good testing ground, both for getting a sense of well-being that really goes deep, deep, deep inside, and for teaching you the power of perception,

that the labels you apply to the body really do have an influence on how you're going to be experiencing the body; how you're going to be able to settle down in the body.

The still breath—if you can get your well down to the still breath and tap into it—is a place to rest. So use that when you need to rest. But remind yourself that the meditation is not all about resting. It's about learning what's going on between body and mind, because this is a good testing ground for all the issues in the mind. The body is the first thing you're aware of. The body is the first thing you're moving around, the area of reality you're most responsible for. And yet it's not-self. That doesn't mean you have no control over it. It just means that there are limits to what you can control. So you want to explore the limits and make the most of what's inside them.

Years back, I knew someone who was going to study in Thailand and she'd been practicing Ajaan Lee's method. She was staying with an ajaan who didn't have any background in Ajaan Lee's method, and he told her, "Why are you adjusting the breath? It's just a fabrication." She told me that, and my response, although I didn't say it to him, was, "Well, why are you washing your body? Why do you clean your body? It's just a fabrication." You have to take care of these things because they'll then take care of you. And in taking care of them skillfully, you learn an awful lot about the body and the mind: all the five aggregates. And if you want to know what's not-self, what's beyond your control, you try to exert as much control as you can in this area. You'll find there will be limits. It's when you want to run into the limits that you say, "Oh, this is really not-self."

But you don't give up beforehand. If you give up beforehand, you're letting go, as Ajaan Lee says, like a pauper, someone who doesn't have anything to show for letting go at all, because there was nothing there to begin with. But if you make the most of these potentials you have in the body, the potentials you have in the mind, then when you let them go, they're still there. They're of use to you, and they're of use to other people. It's like working hard and getting a good car. You don't take it to bed with you. You leave it outside. You use it when you need to. And you let other people use it, too. In other words, you let go of something, but there's still a lot of use to be gotten out of it, as opposed to not having the car to begin with.

So explore the potentials you have here in the body for dealing with energy. And once you've found the areas where the breath rests and the breath comes from, protect those. Don't let them get exhausted. Don't let them get depleted. Have a sense of their being full, even during the out-breath. Then they can fill the rest of the body with good energy that allows you to settle down with a sense of "just right": well-balanced, with the pleasure and rapture the Buddha describes as permeating the entire body, because you've tapped into the right level.

What Is One

July 13, 2017

In the Canon, there's a brief catechism called the *Novice's Questions.* It's a list of basic Buddhist concepts, lined up from one to ten. The questions are: W*hat is one?, What is two?,* all the way up to W*hat is ten?* And the most interesting one of the lot is: *What is one?* And the answer is: All beings subsist on food.

As long as you're a being, you're going to need food. Of course, when the Buddha is talking about food here, it's not just physical food. There's also the food for consciousness, which in some cases he divides up as physical food, contact, intentions, and consciousness itself. In other places, he identifies the food for consciousness with the other aggregates: form, feeling, perception, and fabrications.

It's only arahants who don't need to feed on these kinds of food. They feed physically, but their minds no longer need to feed, because they don't identify themselves as beings. To be a being, you have to be clinging to something, attached to something. But arahants have no attachments, no clinging, so they're not even defined as beings. When they pass away, you can't even define them as existing, non-existing, both, or neither.

But as for us, we're still feeding because we're still beings. We're beings on the way to awakening. The Buddha himself, before his awakening, was called a Bodhisatta—a being on the way to awakening. So while we're on the path, we need food. And concentration is the prime food we use. Otherwise, if we don't have this food, we're going to go off nibbling on all kinds of other things. All the different members in the committee of your mind have their ideas about what would be good dinner tonight, what the food should be, how it should be fixed. And a lot of the discussion in your mind is about how you're going to feed.

So when you learn how to meditate and get the mind into a state of well-being—finding an object you like, learning how to maximize the sense of pleasure through your directed thought and evaluation—you're adding a new item to the menu. And you want to learn how to develop a taste for this. That means, for instance, when you're working with the breath, trying to breathe in a way that feels really, really satisfying. It's not just in, out, in, out. Ask yourself, "Where are the most sensitive parts in the body right now? Can you breathe for their sake? And what kind of breathing would feel good for them?" You may have a personal preference for longer breathing, but that particular part in your body might like shorter breathing. So pay attention to what it needs. And then, when you've satisfied that part of the body, look for other parts of the body that are especially sensitive, and see if you can satisfy them, too.

The more you can hit your sensitivities like this, the more satisfying the food of concentration will be. Then you can use it to deal with other issues as they come up—the other proposals for what you want to feed on right now. If there are sensual desires coming up in the mind, one of the first ways of dealing with them is to notice, when the desire comes: Where do you feel the tension in the body? Often there's a tension in the back of the hands. Well, breathe in a way that feels really good in the back of the hands—any place where there's tension developing. That way, as part of your negotiations with the members of the committee, you say, "See, here's a better food. It's right here; no trouble at all." Whereas the food of sensual desire can cause a lot of trouble.

It's the same with anger. If you're quick to get angry about things, you have to be quick in learning how to feed the mind and feed the body with the sense of well-being that comes from concentration. Otherwise, you start feeding on the anger and it ends up harming you, harming other people. It's like the kind of food that may be good as you eat it, but it's going to cause trouble further down in your digestive tract.

Sleepiness, torpor: That's another kind of food—one that we really go for. In some cases, the body really does need to rest. But in a lot of cases, it's just creating one more issue unnecessarily. Something interesting may be coming up in the mind—something, however, that one member of the committee doesn't want to be revealed, and so it makes you sleepy. Or just plain old laziness comes in and you latch onto any sign in the body, any sign in the mind, that you're getting sleepy, and make that an excuse to stop. In cases like that, the best kind of food for you is good, heavy breathing, deep breathing—whatever breathing you find energizing.

It's the opposite with restlessness and anxiety. The mind has no place where it can settle down in the present moment, so it goes hunting outside for anything, whatever. When it's anxious about things, it can say, "Look, I have to worry about this. If I don't worry about this, I won't be prepared, I won't be protected." This is where the food of concentration on its own is often not enough. You have to supplement it with the food of discernment, which tells you that whatever is going to happen in the future, you don't really know the details of the danger ahead of you. But you do know that whatever the dangers, expected or unexpected, you're going to need a lot of discernment, you're going to need a lot of alertness, you're going to need a lot of concentration, patience, endurance—all these good qualities—to see you through. And this is how you develop them, by meditating. Not by sitting here worrying.

And finally there's uncertainty. The mind can gorge itself on that. One reason might be the part of the mind that doesn't want to practice, doesn't want to give up its desires, its cravings. Another reason might be a lack of confidence in yourself.

In the first case, you've got to pry around and see, "Why would I not want to find true happiness?" After all, this is a common desire among all your committee members: how to be happy, what would make you happy. And they hold onto their ideas of what would make you happy. So you've got to point out to them the drawbacks of those

ideas. Desire for wealth, desire for power: These things can bring a lot of suffering and harm in their wake. And here the Buddha is offering you a totally harmless kind of food, a totally harmless kind of pleasure. Do you really love yourself? If you do, you'd go for the harmless. You'd avoid *any* kind of harm.

As for lack of confidence in yourself, ask yourself, "Can I be with this breath?" Well, yes. "How about this breath?" Yes. In the beginning, content yourself with small victories. As the Buddha said, even just a finger-snap of the desire to be skillful is, in and of itself, meritorious. Sometimes we're even afraid to want the path, because we're afraid that we'd be committed to more than we can handle, and the part of the mind that's not ready to be committed keeps pulling you back. But you can keep reminding yourself, "I'm not totally committed yet. I just want to think this thought: that it would be really good to find a path that puts an end to suffering, to find a path that I am capable of following, and have some confidence in myself." Learn to feed off these small victories, so that they get larger.

And turn your attention back to the breath, so that you have something even better to feed on. Keep looking for those sensitive spots inside. Try to nourish them with the breath, so that you associate the practice of concentration with a sense of real, visceral well-being. That way, the mind will be more and more inclined to want to go in this direction.

It's as when you're trying to change your diet for the body. Sometimes you try to change from all the greasy, bad food that you've been enjoying to something healthy, and part of the mind resists. It likes the grease; it likes the sugar; it likes the salt. But if you learn how to fix your health food really well, then you begin to realize, "I actually feel better this way, and it tastes good." So you've got to learn how to be a good cook of your breath.

Show some imagination in how you deal with the breath—like that image in the Canon of the wise cook who notices what his master likes: whether it's salty or sweet or alkaline, bland, spicy. Try to figure out what your mind and body would like to enjoy right now, would like to feed off of right now. And see what you can do with the breath to provide that.

A similar principle applies with the other meditation topics. If you're doing *buddho,* think of the whole body as being energized by the word *buddho.* As I was saying today, think of every cell in your body going *bud-dho, bud-dho* together, so that it's not just a mechanical exercise. It's much more organic—you're feeding the mind; you're feeding the body. That way, you've got something good to offer when parts of the mind want to go off and have a midnight snack, gobble down some junk food. You say, "Look, I have something better, right here, right now. And it's not going to cause trouble tomorrow morning. I'm not going to have any diarrhea from this, any digestive illness." This is food that's good all the way: good from your mouth all the way through your system.

That way, you have another answer to that question of what is one. You have a mind that's one, with one object. And it's happy to be there. Because it finds that this is the best food there is.

Remorse

August 30, 2016

When you sit down to meditate and settle down with the breath, the mind becomes very sensitive. Sometimes things you did in the past that you don't feel right about will come up. And they hurt.

At times like that, it's all too easy to start feeling remorse. Remorse is not an attitude or a feeling that the Buddha recommended. As he noticed, it weakens you.

We usually feel remorse for one of two reasons: One is the childish belief that if you feel bad enough about having done something, then the punishment will be mitigated. And the other, of course, is the feeling that if you don't feel badly about something, you'll probably repeat the mistake again.

In the first case, feeling bad about it is not going to make any difference. Noticing that it was a mistake and resolving not to repeat it: That's the best that can be expected of a human being.

As for the fear that we've got some suffering awaiting us in the future as a kind of punishment: The Buddha recommends that, if you want not to suffer from the results of past bad actions or past unskillful actions, you develop the brahmaviharas—and particularly equanimity, along with the ability not to be overcome by pain and not to be overcome by pleasure. Pleasure and pain go together: If you get overcome by pleasure and try to hold onto the pleasure, it can turn into pain. And it's already got you overwhelmed.

It's like catching a fish. You discover that you have a huge fish on your line that can either dive way down into the ocean or jump out of the water. You see it leap up and you say, "Ah, this is pleasure," and you hold onto the line. But then it dives down to the ocean and pulls you down with it.

So if the mind is overcome either by pleasure or pain, there's going to be suffering.

But as for the question of whether you "deserve" to suffer or not, it's interesting: The Buddha never talks about people deserving to suffer. He simply says that certain actions lead to certain results. But he's here to cure our problem of suffering whether it's "deserved" or not. He never said, "I'll teach you the end of suffering only if you don't deserve to suffer." The end of suffering is there for everyone, whether they "deserve" to suffer or not. That point should be underlined many, many times.

The teaching on kamma is not meant to explain the horrible things that happen to people or to justify meting out misery to them. It's supposed to be used to explain how you can find a way out—so that whatever you did in the past, there's a way out for you.

Think of Angulimala. He had killed scores of people and yet he was able to become an arahant.

So the question of fear over deserved suffering: The Buddha's not here to tell you that you deserve to suffer. He's here to say, "This is the way you act skillfully so that you don't have to suffer." And if you've done unskillful things in the past, note the fact, note that it was a mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then develop the brahmaviharas.

Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for everyone.

Compassion for yourself, compassion for everyone.

Empathetic joy for yourself, empathetic joy for everyone.

Equanimity for yourself, equanimity for everyone.

Yet he also says you have to develop discernment. After all, sometimes you can do very unskillful things based on what you think is the compassionate thing to do, but you can't simply trust your loving heart to tell you what to do in a given situation, thinking that where there's a lot of love, that'll take care of it. We can do some awfully unskillful things based on love.

So what is the proper motivation to make sure you don't repeat a mistake? The Buddha lists two qualities: One is heedfulness and the other is samvega.

Heedfulness is simply realizing that whatever you do will come back in one way or another, and so you want to be very, very careful about what you do.

Samvega is the attitude that looks at life as a whole and sees how scary it is. That's one of the meanings of the word samvega. The other meaning is dismay. You think of how we are born again and again and again. We all want happiness but we can do some really unskillful things based on our desire for happiness. We find people whom we love and we can do unskillful things based on our love.

In other words, as long as we're living under the power of delusion, then no matter how good things get, there's always a downside. There's always the possibility that everything will fall apart. No matter how much we understand about the Dhamma, there are times when we forget.

Thinking in this way gives you the motivation to want to get out of the cycle. And the path of meditation is the most skillful way out. Some people say that it's selfish that you're just pulling yourself out. But think about what samsara means. Samsara's not a place. It's an activity, something we do: We keep wandering on. We get this body and we wander through life with this body. When we can't use this body anymore, the mind goes wandering off to find something else.

And it's driven by craving and clinging. And you know what the mind is like when it's driven by craving and clinging. Especially when it's being pushed out of something where it's used to being. It's going to look for something new and just grab onto anything. It's like being pushed out of your house. You'll take the first house that

appears on the market.

So this is an activity. And we actually create our worlds of becoming through the activity of wandering-on, through craving. We're creating our individual worlds to feed on. So it's like an addiction. And the best thing to do with an addiction is to learn how to end it. You'll benefit, the people around you will benefit, too.

Because as we feed on our worlds, we're often feeding on the same food sources that other people are because our worlds overlap, which means there's competition. So simply pulling yourself out of the cycle really helps to at least take one mouth out of the feeding cycle.

And you're setting a good example. Because the things we do in order to get out are not just a matter of running away. We have to be generous. We have to be virtuous. We try to develop good qualities.

One of the motivations for doing this is compassion. As the Buddha said, the people who help us with our practice: If we really do get out, then they benefit greatly.

So it's important to realize that no matter how good things get, no matter how much you've learned about things, if you haven't reached any of the noble attainments there's always a possibility of backsliding. That's what's scary; that's what's terrifying about all this. This means that the proper response when you've realized that you've made a mistake, you've harmed somebody, is not remorse. It's heedfulness together with samvega.

And it's interesting that, in the Buddha's analysis for both of our reasons for wanting to go for remorse, his antidotes for remorse in both cases are the brahmaviharas: attitudes of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

But he also requires discernment because, as I said, compassion can sometimes be deluded. That's where compassion gets scary. This is why discernment is so important. What does it come down to? An understanding of the principles of what's skillful and what's not.

The Buddha gives some basic examples in the precepts. But then there are the subtler things, and those require a lot of discernment, a lot of mindfulness, a lot of alertness to see how the mind can lie to itself about what's skillful and what's not, and to learn how to see through those lies.

This is why we meditate: to strengthen our powers of mindfulness, to strengthen our powers of alertness, so that we can see what we're doing and what's actually coming about as the result of our actions. And then remembering that.

Again, you don't have to use remorse in order to pound it into the mind that something was a mistake. Heedfulness and samvega are enough.

So basically what the Buddha is doing is having us react to our mistakes as adults. One of the things you've learned as an adult is that mistakes are very easy to make, but

you can learn from them. And that's the important thing: learning from them—while being mature enough to know how not to repeat the mistake without having to beat yourself up over your past mistakes.

At the same time, you prepare yourself: You know that you've got some past mistakes. There's going to be some pain coming in the future. This shouldn't be news. So you develop the qualities of mind that can guarantee that pain and pleasure won't overcome the mind. In other words, you develop concentration; you develop discernment. Having concentration as an alternative to sensual pain and pleasure puts you in a safe place, so that when pains come, you have an alternative place to go. That way, the pains don't have to drive you around.

And as you've learned in getting the mind to settle down: If, when you're working with the breath, there's a sense of ease, then if you leave the breath for the sense of ease, everything falls apart, blurs out. You get into what's called delusion concentration, where things are very nice and very still, but you don't really know where you are. When you come out, you're not really sure whether you were asleep or awake. That's not the path.

So you have to learn that even though there's pleasure coming up as you're working with the breath, you can still stay with the breath, you don't get waylaid by the pleasure. In this way, getting the mind properly into concentration helps you overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures and also helps you not to be overwhelmed by the sense of pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down and be still.

Now this, of course, includes discernment, because that ultimately is what's going to free you from pleasure and pain. And notice, the Buddha's discernment works whether the pleasures or pains are deserved or not. You realize that you've had enough of that back-and-forth. You want to go to something better.

And so you can pull the mind out of both pleasure and pain. You see the mind, or awareness, as something separate from pleasure and pain. This is one of the skills you develop as you meditate. And this is a really important skill. Because as that chant said just now, "We're all subject to aging, illness, and death." We have these things lying in wait and we want to be ready for them.

As someone once said, the most amazing thing about human beings is that we all know we're going to die but we all act as if we didn't.

Well, you know. Act as if you take it to heart. You can prepare. You can get the mind ready for times when there'll be aging, illness, and death. And yet you don't have to suffer from them because you've learned how to separate the concern for pleasure and pain, and the pleasure and pains themselves, from your awareness. You let these aspects of the present separate themselves into three separate things. That way, the pleasures and pains, and your concerns about pleasures and pains, don't have to weigh the mind down. They're there, but they're not having an impact on the mind. That's

when you're really safe.

You get to that safe place not through remorse, but through heedfulness and a sense of samvega. Those are two emotions that you can really rely on. Of course, you don't want to just sit in samvega. You want it to propel you to act. As with that chant just now on aging, illness, death, separation: That part is all about samvega. But the reflection on kamma: That's actually *pasada,* confidence that there's a way out. It's through your actions that you can find the way out. Always keep that in mind. Things don't end with samvega. They move onto pasada, confidence, and from there onto release.

So meditate with confidence. Think of your past mistakes with confidence, that you're not going to have to repeat them. Because you're the type of person who learns.

Wake Up from Addiction

January 12, 2016

As you're settling down with the breath, you don't want to think too much about it, just enough to make it comfortable. You don't want to analyze things to the point where you start losing the breath and getting caught up in the analysis.

So you ask yourself just a few simple questions:

Where do you feel the breath right now?

Does it feel comfortable?

What would make it feel more comfortable?

What would make it feel more like something you'd really want to settle down and spend some time with?

That's pretty much it.

As I've said before, when you're getting the mind into concentration and developing jhana, the object isn't jhana. The object is the breath. It's only when you've settled down with the breath for quite a while that you begin to be in a position where you can step back a little bit to really question and understand what you're doing, so that it does become more of a skill.

You begin to see patterns. And one of the patterns you begin to notice is that you really are developing what the Buddha called the seven factors for awakening.

Sometimes the list is mistaken to be a description of what awakening is like, but it's not. It's a description of how you get there. Awakening is so much more than these things. And of course, the description of how you get there is much more useful than the description of what it's going to be like when you get there anyhow.

So what have you got in the list? You've got mindfulness: in this case, remembering to keep your focus on the breath, which is an aspect of the body in and of itself. You're ardently trying to stay here, alert to what's going on. Mindfulness means remembering not only to stay here, but also what works in order to keep you here. Then you're ardent to do whatever needs to be done. And finally, as they say in the texts, you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you're with the body in and of itself, and not the body in the context of the world or thinking about issues of the world. You're right here with this sensation of the presence of the body. That's your frame of reference.

Then there's analysis of qualities, as you analyze what kind of breathing is good, what kind of breathing is not good. You also look into the qualities in the mind. Is the

pressure of the mind's focus too strong or too weak? Are you feeling lax and lazy or are you feeling overly stimulated? And what can you do to bring things back into balance?

Once you've analyzed things, then you put in the effort to bring them into balance. That effort is the third factor for awakening.

When you do it right, there's going to be a sense of fullness, refreshment, or rapture. That's the fourth. This rapture or refreshment can come in a weak form or in a strong form. But the refreshment is what allows you to stay here and say, "Oh, yes, this really is good."

Then, after a while, the rapture or refreshment has done its work and begins to fade a little bit, and there's more of a sense of ease and calm—and when there's a calm, then the mind can get concentrated. Those are the fifth and sixth factors.

And as the mind goes through the stages of concentration, you finally get to a point where the mind feels very equanimous. It's not excited about anything but it feels okay right here—and okay not in a small way. Okay in a big way. Everything feels very stable, on an even keel. You feel really at home, settled down here. That equanimity is the seventh and final factor.

Now, analyzing things in terms of these seven factors is useful for reminding you how to get into concentration when things are difficult. And it's important to notice that this is one of the lists of qualities in which your discernment does some work before you settle in. In other words, you're not just using brute force to get the mind to settle down, and it's not the case that it naturally settles down on its own. You find that you've got to do a little work to analyze things enough to see what's good and what's not good, what needs encouraging, what needs cutting away. And only then will the mind settle down.

But understanding your practice in terms of these factors is good not only for reminding yourself how to get into concentration, but for other purposes as well.

One way in which they're really useful is if you find yourself engaged in some addictive behavior or addictive thinking. You can think of that addiction as like being caught in a bad dream, trapped in the sense that it keeps looping around. The mind goes through lots of different feedback loops. If you were to trace the mind as it wanders through the day ordinarily, it tends to switch from one loop to another loop to another one to another one. But certain patterns of behavior are more like getting stuck in a loop and not being able to get out.

You do something to feel better, but then you feel bad about it and then because you feel bad about it you want to do something to make yourself feel good and so you go back and do the first thing again, because you think that's the only way you're going to get a little hit of pleasure. The mind just goes around and around and around in this loop and doesn't come out.

You've got to learn how to get out of that loop. And as I said, if you can regard it as a bad dream, ask yourself: What do you do to get out of the dream?

Well, you wake up. That's what these factors are for.

So let's say you've got a desire to give in to some lustful thinking. Part of the mind says there's going to be some pleasure there, but you have to remember and recognize that that's not a part of the mind you want to hang out with or to believe. Even though there might be some pleasure in the short term, the long-term results are not all that positive, not at all in your best interests.

So the first thing you do is establish your awareness with the body or with any of the frames of reference for mindfulness. But say you're with the body: Okay, work with the breath. Try to reclaim the breath, because oftentimes these patterns of thinking tend to take hold of your breath. They come in and seize it and make it theirs. They appropriate the breath for their purposes. They make you feel uncomfortable here, uncomfortable there; this part of the body feels tense, that part of the body feels blocked. And part of the committee will say, "Okay, if you give in to our desire, then we'll unblock things."

It's as if they've kidnapped the breath and are holding it hostage.

So you've got to reclaim the breath.

Breathe deeply. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing, that airs things out inside and that allows you to establish yourself with a frame of reference, so that you're not swimming around with these thoughts. You've at least got the breath in the body here. When you hold onto that, you're putting yourself in a position where you can watch things in the mind and analyze them from a little bit of distance. You don't have to get involved.

Remember: *The* main prerequisite for understanding things going on in the mind is your ability to step back from them and see them as something separate.

That's what the image of the committee of the mind is useful for. As is Ajaan Lee's image of all those germs going through your blood, some of them going through the blood vessels around your brain and dropping off a few thoughts as they go past, or going around other parts of the body and making you feel feelings here and feelings there, sensations here and there that would get you provoked into doing something unskillful.

The purpose of these perceptions is to help you see your thoughts as alien. You don't have to side with them; you don't have to take them on. And as for the committee, just remember that some of the members of the committee are bad. They've been pretty powerful in the past, but they don't have to maintain that power. You can learn how to change the balance of power in the mind. So see them as alien, too. That deprives them of a lot of their strength right there.

Once you've got this beachhead with the breath and this position where you can stand, at the body in and of itself, then you can analyze things further. In other words, this urge you have to think these thoughts: What does it feel like in the body? What are the sensations accompanying it in the different parts of the body? What are the feelings,

what are the thoughts that go through the mind? Instead of just running with them, tell yourself that you're going to watch them for a bit to see what they're like, where they're heading, and then take them apart.

The Buddha gives lots of different ways of analyzing these things. You could look at them as aggregates: sensations in the body, feelings of pleasure or pain, perceptions, i.e., the images you hold in mind.

Take perceptions, for example: What are the images you hold in mind—not so much about the object you're lusting for, but about lust itself? Why does it seem attractive? What's the glamour? What's the appeal? Can you switch those images?

Or look at the way you talk to yourself about it: Can you change the story line of your fantasy so that it ends up pretty disastrous? Therapists call this "poisoning the fantasy." Analyze things like this so that you can step back from them and see them as separate, and see exactly what it is that exerts the pull that keeps you going back again and again and again.

So you take the terms of analysis and you keep applying them.

This is what the factor of persistence is: If you see something that's unskillful, take it apart. Don't simply fall in with it. Step back from it. And the more you can analyze it into discrete sensations, discrete feelings, or discrete thoughts, the less power it has. It's because these things connect up that they create a strong impression, an overwhelming urge to think thoughts that you know are not going to be helpful, or to do things you know are going to be unskillful, that are going to lead to trouble down the line.

Try to open things up. All too often, when you get focused on something like this—be it anger, lust or whatever—your awareness narrows down and seems to be surrounded on all sides. But if you can open up your awareness, give it a foundation here in the body, and then take all these different things apart, then you see that—as they're taken on one by one by one—they don't have so much power. They're not so formidable. It's when they meld together that they seem strong and overwhelming. So take them apart. Chop them into pieces.

As you keep at this in the beginning, it's going to be a strain because you've got to work against some very strong tendencies. But there will come a point where you break through and there's a sense of refreshment. You've made it to the other side. That's what allows the mind to finally get a sense of ease, to be concentrated, and to develop a sense of equanimity toward the original urge—in other words, not be interested in it any more.

This is how you wake up from the addiction. When you've done this once, then you want to remember that it felt really good when you finally got past the lust. That's a good thing to keep in mind, as food for mindfulness the next time around. As we're practicing, we're trying to gather up enough experience so that our mindfulness isn't informed just by what we've heard or read. It's also informed by what we've done that's

gotten results.

And you want to remind yourself of how good the results are, because that's going to change the tenor of the perceptions in your mind—especially the ones that tell you that once this urge comes, you've got to give in to it inevitably, and there's no other way out once you've already gotten this far down the line with this particular fantasy, so let's just run with it. You've got to learn how to say, "No. Maybe I've been with it for a certain amount of time but I don't have to follow it all the way through. I don't have to finish the story line. I'm not committed. I've cut things off in the past, so why can't I do it now?"

It's interesting that all too often we find it hard to be committed to meditation, but once something unskillful comes into the mind we think, "Well, I've already done this much, I've gotten this far. I'm committed, so I might as well go all the way."

We can cut that story line, or that false sense of obligation.

Then there's the other voice, the one that says, "You've given in in the past, you're sure to give in again in five minutes, so make it easy on both of us. Give in right now and get it over with. Don't struggle."

Well, remind yourself that that doesn't "get it over with," and that the struggle itself is something skillful.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot. He says, "When you give in totally without a struggle, how can you say that you lost? You didn't even put up a fight. If there were a fight, then you could say one side won and the other side lost, but here's there's no fight at all." There's more honor in struggling and losing than in not struggling at all.

So put up some struggle. And when the voice says that you're going to give in, you can reply, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do in five minutes' time, but right now I'm not going to give in." And of course, in five minutes' time you tell yourself again, "Right now I'm not going to give in, either." That way, you can make your determination outlast the urge to give in to your addiction. And you can strengthen that determination by being with the breath, by having these tools for analyzing things so that what seems like an overwhelming urge is broken down simply into aggregates, little bits and pieces of physical sensations, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness of these things.

That's how you get past. That's how you wake up out of these bad dreams.

So try to appreciate the fact that as you're working on getting the mind settled down with the breath you're getting to know your mind a lot better. You're developing some skills that you can use in a lot of different situations that you might not expect, but the skills are there, ready to be put into use.

The Buddha taught things that are useful. Sometimes his lists seem dry and foreign, but as you get more and more acquainted with your breath, acquainted with the mind as

it circles around the breath and finally settles in, you see that the Buddha's descriptions are really accurate, very precise, very helpful. He worked many eons to be in the position where he could give that kind of advice, and he meant for it to be used. So think of all the trouble he went to to learn these things and to pass them on. Make it a sign of your gratitude for the Buddha that you're going to use his teachings and come out with results.

Mindfulness 2.0

August 19, 2016

Ajaan Suwat tells the story of when he was a young monk and first went to stay with Ajaan Mun. One day, Ajaan Mun asked him how his meditation was going, and Ajaan Suwat replied, "My mind is all over the place. It's distracted." Ajaan Mun comforted him, saying, "Well, the fact that you know that the mind is distracted counts as mindfulness."

And Ajaan Suwat took it well. He realized that Ajaan Mun was trying to comfort him—not saying that what he was doing was good. It's a beginning step, recognizing that your mind is distracted. But once you've recognized it, you've got to do something about it. You've got to figure out how to make it undistracted.

This is very different from how mindfulness is usually taught nowadays, where it's all about being nonreactive, just being with whatever comes up. That's not how the Buddha taught mindfulness.

Now, there is *some* virtue in being with whatever comes up, because all too often we try to deny things. Years back, when they had that Ajaan Chah celebration up in Portola Valley, a lot of his students were talking about what attracted them to Ajaan Chah. And it seems that in every case, they were having trouble simply adjusting to the fact that they were in Thailand, accepting things the way they were. So a lot of his teaching had to do with equanimity and patience. He probably saw that Westerners lacked these qualities and that they needed them to be reinforced before they could really get started on anything further in the practice.

Our society's in sore need of equanimity and patience, which is why a lot of what gets sold as mindfulness nowadays is actually about being equanimous with regard to whatever comes up, being patient with whatever comes up. But that's not the end of the story.

There was an incident way back in Burma, I've forgotten which of the Burmese meditation traditions they tell it in, but one of the founders of the tradition went to see an old monk up in the hills and asked him about where to look for good guidance in meditation. And the old monk told him, "Everything you need to know is in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta, isn't it?" Which was a huge piece of misinformation. The Maha Satipatthana Sutta tells only a part of mindfulness practice. Unfortunately, though, the founder of the tradition went back and took that as his guide.

The full formula at the beginning of the sutta says, "You keep track of the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, mental qualities in

and of themselves: ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." But then the rest of the sutta talks about only one part of that formula: what it means to keep track of body, or feelings, or mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves. So the sutta's basically teaching Mindfulness 1.0. It tells you one part of the formula: what it means to keep track of something.

But as for the rest—being ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That gets left for other parts of the Canon. And yet the parts that are left out are what the practice is all about. Ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: This is how you get the mind into concentration.

"Alert" means that you watch what you're doing and the results that come from what you're doing. "Mindful" means that you keep in mind what you've got to do. And ardency is the desire to do it well.

Ajaan Lee, when he explains mindfulness practice, points to the wisdom in ardency. You don't just know about things. You know that something has to be done with them.

And this is hinted at even in the sutta. When it talks about dealing with the hindrances, dealing with the factors for awakening, dealing with the fetters that arise at the six senses, it doesn't tell you just to watch them coming and going. Say that a hindrance or a fetter arises: You watch for when it's present, you watch for when it's not, and then you watch to see how it may be made to go away and not come back. With each of the factors for awakening, you watch for when it's present, you watch for when it's not, and then you watch to see how it can be maintained and developed to a point of culmination.

So even in the sutta it's not just a matter of sitting there watching things. There's a direction where you want to go. There's a direction for your ardency. That's Mindfulness 2.0. It takes you through the ardency into concentration.

As the Buddha said, one of the functions of mindfulness is to keep unskillful qualities out of the mind and bring skillful qualities in. Like a gatekeeper at a frontier fortress: You've got to watch out for the spies and the other people who might create trouble in your fortress, so you learn to recognize them in order to keep them from coming in. And you remember to recognize the people who are friends and allies—the soldiers and other people on your side—so that you can let them in.

So, as you're sitting here meditating, you do have to admit what's coming up, but don't just stop with the admitting. You realize that something has to be done. What you keep in mind are the duties of the four noble truths. Stress has to be comprehended; its cause has to be abandoned; its cessation has to be realized; and the path to its cessation has to be developed. In many cases, the Buddha emphasizes two of those duties more than the others: the abandoning and the developing.

And so here we are, trying to develop concentration, which means that anything

that comes up that's not related to the breath, you put it aside, put it aside. Anything that *is* related to the breath that helps you settle down, you try to develop it, you try to strengthen it.

This is what it means to be ardent. And this is why it's wise, because without the ardency, things come and things go and you're just sitting there on the side of the road watching them come and go. But here, this is *your mind.* It's not just cars on a road. And what shape is your mind in? What shape do you want it to be in? You want your mind to be in good shape. You want to be able to say No to the things in the mind that are going to harm it, and Yes to the things that will help it develop. You don't want to just watch the cars. You want to be in the driver's seat, headed in the right direction.

So anything related to the breath, anything that helps you settle down with the breath: Yes. And once you're here, what do you do with the breath? Ardency in this case means being especially sensitive to the breath and to what kind of breathing would feel really good right now. After all, the purpose of right mindfulness is to lead into right concentration. So if you can get absorbed in the breath, gain an interest in the breath, feel at ease with the breath, that helps you stay with a sense of well-being.

The Buddha lists four qualities that help with success in doing this, the four bases of power. The first is simply the desire: You want to do this well. That's the ardency. But ardency also contains two other bases of power: persistence and a quality called intent. This is where right effort and the four bases of success overlap. You learn how to generate the desire to do this well. Then you stick with it, you keep at it. If the mind wanders off, you bring it back. It wanders off again, you bring it back again. Three times, five times, ten times, a hundred times: Keep bringing it back. Show it that you mean business.

When it comes back, pay careful attention to two things: One, what would be a really comfortable breath to stay with so that the mind will want to stay here? And two, watch out for the fact that it's going to wander off again. You want to be able to catch it before it goes. The more quickly you can catch it, the more you'll see into the mind, the various stages in how it slips off and somehow tries to deny to itself what it's doing. But when you can see through that, then you're in a much better position to stop it from happening.

And finally there's the fourth base of power, *vimamsa,* which is another aspect of discernment. You try to use your ingenuity in figuring out ways that'll help the mind to stay. This is what gets you absorbed, because you're experimenting and you're learning. You're not just tying the mind down to a stake; you're gaining some training in: What is it like to be with the body? And what's actually going on in the body? What are the layers of breath energy in the body?

We talk about the in-and-out breath and the breath that gets suffused through the nerves in the blood vessels. Well, there's another level that's even deeper still, that's

very quiet. It's a kind of energy, but it's an energy that just stays in place. You can access it only when the mind is very quiet, too. Different people will find that they have nodes of this energy in different places. It could be in the middle of the chest, it could be down by the breastbone, or right between the eyes. There are lots of different places where—if you're really, really quiet—you can get the sense of great stillness right there. And there's no need for an in-and-out breath right there. If you can access that, try to stay with it. It's a good resting place for the mind.

But know that it's good to be with all the different levels of the breath. Because sometimes the problem is not there with the still breath, it's with the breath energy spreading through the body. It might not be spreading well, so what can you do to get it to go to places where it ordinarily doesn't go? Try breathing in different directions: in from the left, in from the right, in from the front, in from the back, down, up. See what helps for that particular spot. Or sometimes the problem is simply the fact that the breath is too shallow or too deep. Watch out for the breath when it gets really shallow and very light. If your range of awareness isn't broad, you'll tend to drift off. Sometimes after a day of work, you need some heavier breathing to refresh the body.

Learn to realize that these three different types of breath energy—the in-and-out breath, the suffused breath, and the still breath—have their uses. Then, as you're maintaining your mind in the present moment, this is a good area to study, to apply your ingenuity to figure out what's going on and what could make it better. This makes the concentration more interesting. At the same time, it gets the mind more and more under your control.

As the Buddha said, one of the purposes of meditation is to think thoughts that you want to think and not think thoughts you don't want to think. That, too, is one of the purposes of mindfulness. He calls mindfulness a governing principle. In other words, it watches over what's unskillful and figures out how to put an end to it. It watches over what's skillful and figures out how to develop it.

When the Buddha talks about how right mindfulness, right effort, and right view all circle around all the different factors of the path, he shows clearly that the role of mindfulness is to remember. If you encounter something that's wrong, you have to remember to abandon it. If you encounter something that's skillful, you remember to develop it.

That's Mindfulness 2.0. After learning how to watch things arise and pass away on their own, you now learn how to make good things arise and make unskillful things pass away. And that way, the mindfulness gives a lot more benefits. It gives you tools to deal with things so that you can actually complete the duties of the four noble truths and realize the cessation of suffering. That's a large goal, but it's within our reach, something we can all do—if we establish our mindfulness properly.

As the Buddha said, if it were impossible to abandon unskillful qualities and to

develop skillful qualities, he wouldn't have taught it. Or if the process of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities led to pain and suffering, he wouldn't have taught it, either. But because we *are* able to abandon these unskillful things and develop the skillful ones, and it's a good thing to do because it leads to true happiness: That's why the Buddha taught, and that's why we're practicing.

Mindfulness Like a Dam

August 10, 2017

Upasika Kee has an analogy where she compares mindfulness to a dam across a river. This goes against our usual picture of mindfulness as an open, allowing state of mind that allows everything to flow. But her understanding of mindfulness is closer to what the Buddha talked about. It's a way of exercising restraint over the mind. You keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with a particular topic—like the body, or feelings, or the mind, in and of themselves—and within that framework, you remember what to do with whatever comes up. If something unskillful comes up, you try to get rid of it, or at least turn it into something skillful. If there's something skillful there, you try to encourage it. You're not just letting things arise and pass away on their own.

You're actually trying to give rise to skillful things and make sure they don't pass away. And, as with putting up a dam across any river, in the process of putting it up you learn a lot about the currents in the river. You want to keep the mind with the breath. And, all of a sudden, you find yourself someplace else. What's important there is that you take a very matter-of-fact attitude toward what's happened and just bring your attention back. Stay with the breath again.

But the next time around, try to be a little bit more alert to the warning signs that the mind is about to go off, and do what you can to counteract them. There may be a little twitching or stirring someplace in the body, which corresponds to a little twitching or stirring in the mind. And you can breathe through it. You've diffused it, at least for the time being. The quicker you can get at this process, catching the mind in time, the more you learn about the currents of the mind, how a decision gets made.

We were talking today about a knee-jerk—or I guess what you might call an elbow-jerk—reaction: An image of a watch comes into your mind, and you lift up your arm to look at the time. Noticing this makes you think about how many times you do that sort of thing in the course of the day without even thinking about it—which is just like letting the river flow. But now you've put up a dam, and so you begin to notice things in the mind you didn't notice before. You begin to realize how many layers there are in the mind, like the many layers of currents in a deep river. If a dam isn't strong, you're not going to see them.

Ajaan Fuang once had a student who complained that the more she meditated, the messier her mind seemed to be. And he told her that it was because she was detecting things that were there all the time but that she hadn't noticed before. It's like cleaning your room. If you don't dust your room every day, you never see how many new layers of dust settle on the furniture or the floor in a day because the old dust is already there.

When the new dust comes, it doesn't make much difference. But if you dusted the room every day, wiped it down every day, then the least little bit of dust that came in, you'd see immediately. And it would look appalling.

So your standards change. They become more meticulous, and you get to see things that are more and more refined happening in the mind. Now, you're not going to like a lot of what you see. Well, just accept that fact. Again, take a very matter-of-fact attitude toward that: that this is the way the mind has been all along. You're trying to uncover things, so don't be afraid to see things you don't like. After all, if you don't see them, how are you going to deal with them? They're just going to stay there—hidden powers in the mind.

The other part of having a dam across a river is that you can then direct the water in the direction you want it to go. In this case, you're trying to turn it toward concentration. Here again, it requires mindfulness to remember what works in getting the mind to stay with the breath. And when you finally get a sense of ease and well-being with the breath, what do you do with it? How do you let it soak through the body, seep through the body, and keep watch over it? Here the currents of the mind are headed toward one thing. And when the currents in the mind are concentrated like this, they can wash a lot of things away. So even though the image of the dam seems a little bit restricted, it's there for a good purpose, because otherwise your mind is all over the place.

There's a passage in the Canon comparing a mind with hindrances to a river with lots of outlets. As a result, the river doesn't have any strength, because the water goes flowing off in all directions. But if you focus it on one channel, it has a lot of force. So we're going to use this force to clean up what's in the mind. You're going to find things you don't like in the mind, but they're not going to stay there. Your ability to see them is the first step toward washing them away—trying to understand when and why you have greed for something, or lust for something, or anger for something.

There are many layers going on—again, like many layers of currents in the river. First, there's what you see as immediately appealing about the object. And, even with anger, there's something appealing about the anger around it. Then there's another layer of appeal: Why do you like seeing that as attractive? These layers get more and more subtle. But the really subtle ones are the ones that are going to matter, that come from the lizard brain, communications that zip through the mind: very quick, very subtle. If you haven't been training your mind to keep it with one object and bring it back when it wanders off, you're not going to see them. But if you have, you will. And you begin to realize the extent to which these little images that go through the mind, like subliminal images on TV, have a huge impact. The more stillness you have, the more you can be in control of how you respond to things. This is what the dam of mindfulness does for you: It allows the water to stop, and then you direct it to where you want it to go.

So it's through standing in the way of these things that we learn about them. If you

just go with the flow, everything is a flow. All the currents get mingled together, and you can't tell them apart. Whereas the Buddha says that if you really want to understand things, you have to learn how to separate them, in the sense of seeing how this thought functions in this way and that thought functions in that way. This perception feeds on that perception. They are interconnected, but they are somewhat distinct. And you want to see them as separate from one another, and separate from you. That, he said, is how you get past ignorance. You learn how to see things in the six senses and all the processes around the senses as something separate.

So there are many currents to see here. And the more stillness you have, the better.

To change the analogy, it's like being in charge of a large corporation and suddenly realizing that the different workers have power centers and ways of making decisions that you didn't know about at all. They were making independent decisions without really consulting you. And they were skewing the information that was coming up from the lower levels of the organization so that you'd be inclined to see things their way and would automatically make decisions their way. But now you're beginning to wander around the office, learning the politics inside and seeing where the misinformation's coming from. It can be somewhat upsetting or embarrassing to realize how much you've allowed things to go astray inside your own corporation. But now, at least, you're cleaning things out.

And right there, there's hope, in the same way that putting a dam across the river of the currents of your mind can serve a good purpose. In the beginning, it feels constricting because things don't flow as they normally did. But if you learn how to direct the flow of the mind in a new direction, you see a lot of things you didn't see before. You can clear up a lot of messes that you didn't even know were there.

So as you build this dam of mindfulness in your mind, make sure that it's solid. Build it on good foundations: the foundation of the precepts, the foundation of right view. And that way, you'll be like the image in the Dhammapada: Just as irrigators direct the flow of the water, you learn how to direct the flow of the mind. You build a dam, open a channel in the right direction, and you get the water to do what you want.

The Use of the Present

November 28, 2016

We focus on the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, but we don't make them the goal in and of themselves. We're trying to take them apart to see what they're made of, because we've been putting them together in all kinds of strange ways, ways that lead to suffering. They're like raw materials. We've been creating weapons out of them: weapons that harm other people, weapons that harm ourselves. But they don't have to be weapons. We can take the weapons apart and reassemble the parts into something actually beneficial.

See what we've got right here. We've got the body breathing. It has different postures. And it has different elements inside: earth, water, wind, and fire. There are 32 parts—and 32 is just the beginning. There are lots more little parts in there, too. So you want to be with these aspects of the body as they're happening. The same with feelings as they arise; the same with mind states. We make them mean something. In the past, the meanings have been unskillful, but now we're going to learn how to put them together in a more skillful way. So we take them apart to reassemble them for a good purpose. We don't take them as ends in and of themselves.

There's that tendency to fetishize the present moment. "If you can be in the present moment, everything's going to be okay": That's the mantra of the mindfulness movement. But there are times when you're tempted to say, "Let's just disown mindfulness entirely," at least in the way it's been turned into a business here in the States. It's a shame, because "mindfulness" is a perfect word for what the Buddha was talking about: keeping something in mind.

We're not here with the present moment just to accept the present moment, because that's not going to solve all our problems. We're here to see what we've got here in the present moment, the basic building blocks, and to see if we can turn them into a path: a path to the end of suffering—because, after all, the path we're following is something you put together.

Even the way you breathe is something you put together. You have an image in the mind of how the breath should be, but sometimes that image may be harmful. It's going to have an impact on how you actually breathe. If you change the image, it'll change the way you breathe. You can experiment, say, emphasizing the out-breath. Without paying much attention to the in-breath, be more careful to breathe out, to get all the unhealthy air out of your lungs: See what holding that idea of the breath in mind does. Or you can experiment the other way around. See what works best right now.

Or with your feelings, how you relate to pains in the body: You may have some old, unskillful ways of fabricating pains. There *is* a physical cause for most pains—the body's ready to create pains in all kinds of ways—but particular pains come up and we tend to try to trap them in a particular way, or move them around in a particular way, or we picture them to ourselves in a particular way, and that's going to have an impact on how we actually experience them.

The same with mind states: Things come up in the mind. Some things come up and it's very easy to let them go. Other things come up and they're bristling with Velcro, or with bigger hooks than Velcro. They dig right in. There's a fascination with them. And we can fabricate those thoughts into all kinds of worlds.

So the solution is to take these things apart and then learn how to fabricate them in good ways. Fabricate the breath. Fabricate your feelings into a state of concentration. Fabricate your thoughts into questions you might ask about where the stress is: What can you do to understand it? What can you do to figure out the cause? What can you do to abandon the cause? Those are useful questions. That's a good use of your directed thought and evaluation: the way the mind talks to itself.

So the present moment is not an absolute. It's something you're always fabricating, and the strategy of the path is to learn how to fabricate it in a new direction, toward the end of suffering. This means that you're using everything that comes up in the present as a means to a larger end. You've already been using it as a means in the past, but this time you're going to use it with more knowledge—and hopefully with some more skill—as a means to a better end. The more knowledge you bring to these processes, the less you'll suffer.

There's an interesting piece I saw today in *The New York Times,* complaining about the mindfulness movement and its tendency to fetishize the present. The author's complaint was that people don't really get happy because of what they do. People get happy because of circumstances. And the solution to the problem is that we've got to change the society so that people will be happy. However, the mindfulness movement is opposed to changing society, or is an obstacle to that change: That was the author's take.

Yet this is one of those arguments where both sides are wrong. In other words, simply being in the present moment is not going to make you happy. But then trying to create a perfect society is not going to make you happy, either.

Look at the Buddha. If anybody could have created a perfect society, it would have been him. But he saw that it was useless. There was a time when Mara came to him. The question had arisen in the Buddha's mind, "Could it be possible to rule in such a way that you wouldn't have to create bad kamma and that you could do nothing but good for all beings?" Mara shows up, and says, "Ah, yes, do that." And the Buddha realizes that this idea of creating a perfect society is all a trick of Mara, because you're

using people for ends. And how skillful are those ends? Even if the ends are good, there's a tendency to try to attain them in unskillful ways, to impose them on people. If you tell people that things will be good and they'll be happy only if society is perfect, people would die before they could find true happiness.

On the other hand, the solution is not a matter of simply accepting things as they are. It's learning how to reshape them in a skillful way, starting with learning how to reshape things skillfully within yourself and, at the same time, being generous and virtuous. Generosity and virtue are probably the two best things for improving society. We're never going to get a perfect society, but you find that the wiser you are in your generosity, the more consistent you are in your virtue, then the better the world you create around you. And it can be done without force, without imposing your will on other people.

Generosity and virtue are the yeast that gets into a society and makes it human, regardless of what the structure or system may be. If people were more virtuous and more generous, things would be a lot less oppressive. And the people who are virtuous and generous are also finding that they create happiness for themselves. It's to their benefit. That goes together with the practice of meditation.

In the Buddha's image, virtue cleans your discernment, and discernment cleans your virtue. And under the term "virtue" in that passage, the Buddha included the practice of the jhanas and the knowledges you can gain based on jhana. As virtue and discernment clean each other, he said, it's like one hand washing another hand or one foot washing another foot. Both sides benefit. And you're shaping the present moment in a new way. We're not here just to accept things. We do have to figure out what we have and to accept what we've got, as raw materials, but then we have to figure out what's the best thing to *do* with those materials. That's what the path is all about.

The present moment is a path. It's leading someplace. The question is, "What kind of path is it? Where does the particular path you're on right now lead?" If your mind wanders off to thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of lust, thoughts of anger, it *is* a path, but it's a path in a downward direction.

If you can develop thoughts of renunciation, compassion, and goodwill, that's a path leading upward. If you can take your thoughts and talk to yourself about the breath, get more settled in the present moment, that leads even higher. So we've got the raw materials here. The problem is, as I said, that we've been turning them into weapons and using them to harm ourselves and harm others.

But you can grind those same raw materials down and turn them into medicine. That's one of the Buddha's images: The Dhamma is like medicine. He's like a doctor. And here you are, learning to be a doctor yourself, taking the things that you used to use to poison yourself and figuring out how, if you mix them in a different way, they can actually become medicines.

So the present is here to be used. And the teachings are here to teach us how to use it wisely.

The Kamma of Concentration

February 16, 2017

Years back, I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology—the psychology of how people find happiness—and to approach it from a Buddhist point of view. One of the things I noticed, as I was reading through the book, was that there was no consideration of what the impact of your search for happiness might have on other people. The writer, as a psychologist, was claiming to be morally neutral, which is supposedly scientific, but there was no consideration at all that your search for happiness might harm others or yourself. So I pointed that out: that from a Buddhist point of view, this was a huge gap, and a huge missing part of the equation.

The editor of the magazine said he was surprised that I'd focused on kamma as the missing factor. He was expecting something more along the lines of emptiness, say, or the bodhisattva vow that you shouldn't be looking for happiness anyhow. But I was surprised that he was surprised, because from the very beginning, the teaching was all about happiness, and it was all about kamma. That's how the Buddha differentiated his teachings from others'. He was a *kammavadin,* someone who taught kamma.

This relates to another surprising incident. I was asked to give a talk on kamma to a group of meditators on the relationship between kamma and meditation. I spoke about how the teachings on kamma are all designed to show that it is possible to master a skill. If kamma, at least as the Buddha taught it, were totally deterministic, there'd be no way to develop a skill, and there'd be no reason to teach at all. After all, people wouldn't be able to change their ways, everything they did would be totally predetermined. If, on the other hand, everything were totally random, there'd be no ability to develop a skill either, because something you might master today wouldn't mean anything tomorrow if everything kept changing in a random way.

The way the Buddha taught kamma was that past actions have an influence on the present—and there is a pattern to how that influence works out—but the present moment is also shaped by your present actions, your present decisions, and you have some freedom in shaping those present decisions. It's precisely this understanding of kamma that allows you to develop skills.

As I was explaining this to the meditators, I kept getting blank looks. I found out later that they had been taught that meditation was not about *doing* anything at all. You're not supposed to *do* in meditation, just *be.* But that sets you up for all kinds of problems, because if you're going to understand concentration as you attain it, you have to understand it as a kind of action. Otherwise you hit some non-dual states and you think you've become one with the non-duality at the basis of all reality. And then you

get stuck. But if you see that even "non-dual" is a perception, a fabrication, an action, then you can take it apart.

So the teachings on action, on kamma, are directly relevant to how we meditate.

First, there's the basic principle of developing a skill: You look at your actions and notice the effect that they have, both immediate and long-term. Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. Before you act, ask yourself: What's your intention?—because, after all, the intention is the kamma. It determines the quality of the kamma. If you expect that the action is going to harm yourself or others, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. While you're acting, look for the results that are coming immediately, because sometimes some of the results do come right away. You put your finger on a stove, and it's not going to wait until the next lifetime before it burns. Other times, though—as when you plant a seed—you won't see the results until a later time, so you've got to look for those long-term results, too, after you've finished the action. If you see the action is a mistake while you're doing it, you stop. If you see that it was a mistake after you did it, you resolve not to repeat it. That's how you learn any skill.

And it's not the case that the Buddha leaves you to explore everything. He gives advice on things not to do under any circumstances. You don't want to break the precepts. You don't want to engage in wrong speech—not only in lying but also in divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter. And you avoid greed, ill will, and the view that your actions don't yield results, don't make a difference. Those precepts are principles you don't have to test. Just use them. But you find there are a lot of other things that you *do* have to test in practice. As you get more and more sensitive to the impact of your actions, you keep looking for subtler and subtler forms of harm that they might be causing.

But it's important to understand what "harm" means here. As the Buddha said, if you break the precepts, you're harming yourself. It's interesting. If you kill other people, kill other animals, he said, you're really doing harm to yourself. They get killed once, but you may have to endure a long, long time of suffering because of that action. If you want to harm other people, he said, you get *them* to break the precepts because, after all, they're agents, too. They're engaging in actions and they're going to be experiencing happiness or pain based on their actions.

So when you're thinking thoughts of goodwill for yourself, you're basically thinking: "May I act in a skillful way so I can create the causes for happiness." And you think the same for other people: "May they act in skillful ways, too." And that's a thought you can have even for people who have been destructive, horrible, and cruel. Your goodwill for them expresses itself that way: "May they understand the causes for true happiness, and have the strength and willingness to act on them."

But the important principle is that you're working on developing skills: learning how

to be more skillful in how you do things, more skillful in how you say things, more skillful in how you think, how you order your mind.

And this is where kamma comes into the meditation, particularly when you engage in directed thought and evaluation. Some people say that when you get in the first jhana, the directed thought and evaluation are just an unfortunate wobbly or unsteady part of the concentration, but actually they're the work of right resolve. As the Buddha said, noble right resolve is the directed thought and evaluation in your concentration. And what are you evaluating? You're evaluating your actions. You sit here and you *choose* to focus on the breath. That's an intention right there.

And the next question is: How do you maintain that intention? How do you keep supporting it with other skillful intentions? This is where you have to deal with the different techniques of how you get the mind to settle down, how you focus on the breath, how you focus on the parts of the body, whichever topic you choose as your theme. Then you make adjustments, both in the mind and in the theme, so that they fit snugly together. Then do your best to maintain that snugness, to keep an interest in it. Learn how to ask questions about what you're staying with. And one of the big questions is, to what extent is there still some disturbance in this state of concentration? If you're perceptive, you'll notice that the disturbance is in what you're doing. So is there something that you're doing that you can drop and still stay concentrated?

In the beginning, you don't want to drop things too fast, because you need a fair amount of directed thought and evaluation to get everything together and keep them together in a balanced way. The Buddha's image is of a bathman. Bathmen in those days would prepare your soap dough for you. Instead of having a bar of soap, they would have some powder and they'd mix it with water and create ball of dough, like bread dough. Then you'd rub that over your body as you were bathing. The bathman's job was to knead the water into the soap dough so that everything was well mixed. Like bread dough: You want to make sure that all the flour has been moistened, but you don't want any excess water to drip out. You want everything just right.

So the bathman has to use discernment in working the water through the dough, in the same way the Buddha says you work the sense of ease and well-being, the sense of rapture, as it develops in your concentration, though the body. Because in the next step, you want to be able to just sit there immersed in the well-being, as if the body were a large lake cooled by a spring of water welling up from within. In this case, you're not outside of the dough, working the water in. You're actually totally immersed in the water. The water here stands for pleasure. And you're not going to be able to feel immersed in the water of pleasure unless you've worked it through the body.

This is why Ajaan Lee talks about the various breath energies and breath channels in the body. His instructions give you some ideas about how you might direct that sense of ease through the body or think of it spreading through the body, to work its way around any pains you may have, to work its way around any sense of blockage.

Then, when everything is well moistened with the pleasure, you can drop the directed thought and evaluation because they're the disturbance there. Just allow yourself to be immersed in the sense of ease. But, you still have to maintain it. You still have to stay with the breath. Otherwise, if you just drift off into the ease, you lose your balance, you lose your focus, and then you sit there without any real clarity or alertness, or you lose the concentration entirely.

So there's still a certain amount of tension required to keep the object in mind. Remember, you've got to maintain that intention to stay here with clarity. So it's the same principle that the Buddha taught to Rahula. You do something and then you look at the results, and then if the results are not what you like, you change. This is a kind of kamma. It's good to keep that in mind, because sometimes you get into states of non-duality, or a sense of the body disappearing, and you think you've hit something cosmic. But in actuality, you've just hit another perception.

The important thing is that you learn how to keep that questioning attitude in mind: Where is there still disturbance? And look for it not so much in things outside but in the actions of the mind. You see this especially clearly when you're working with pain. The real disturbance there is not the pain. It's the mind's commentary, or the perceptions you're bringing to it.

The Buddha has that tetrad in his breath meditation instructions where he talks about training yourself to breathe 1) with a sense of rapture, 2) with a sense of pleasure, 3) sensitive to mental fabrication—i.e., feelings and perceptions—and then, 4) calming mental fabrication. Those first two steps give you, basically, Ajaan Lee's recommendations for how you start working with pain. There may be pain in one part of the body, but you focus on getting a sense of ease and well-being in another part. Then you allow the ease and well-being to spread through the pain, to loosen things up.

Then, in the next two steps, you're basically taking Ajaan Maha Boowa's approach, which is when you notice, "Here's the pain, but what are the perceptions that make that pain a mental issue?" Learn how to question them. That's how you calm them. In other words, you replace a disturbing perception—one that says the pain has seized the body, the pain hates me, the pain is after me, whatever crazy ideas you may have about the pain—with a perception that's less disturbing. And a lot of your crazy perceptions are hidden behind some more sane-sounding ideas. Even the idea that the pain has invaded your leg: Actually, your leg is still a leg, and your sensation of the leg is just earth, water, wind, and fire: solidity, coolness, energy, and warmth. The pain is something different. The leg stays as a leg, but the pain keeps changing, coming and going. And when it comes, it's not coming at you. As soon as you detect a moment of pain, you can perceive it as going away, going away. Each moment of pain, as it appears, is already going away from you. If you can learn how to use those perceptions, they're calming. The mind can then stay with the pain and not feel pained by it.

So here again, it's a question of your actions. The perceptions you choose are

determining whether or not you're going to suffer from things here in the present moment. All too often, we don't think we have a choice. We have our old set of perceptions. We're equipped with perceptions we've picked up from who-knows-where and who-knows-when, and for most of us that's what reality is. But the Buddha says that you can question them, replace them with new ones, and they'll have a different impact on the mind.

So in all these ways, you have to keep remembering that as you meditate you're engaged in kamma, you're engaged in actions, and there are things you can do more skillfully that give results in the immediate present and on into the future.

We all want happiness, but our problem is that we act under the influence of ignorance. We don't see how our perceptions and thoughts are shaping reality. All we see is the product, and we don't like it. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't, but it seems to be like a crapshoot. You never know what's going to come up—and that's because you're not paying careful attention to what you're doing, in your physical, verbal, and mental actions. But the meditation gives you a sensitivity to your mental actions while you meditate, and to all three kinds of action as you go through the day.

And the teaching on kamma reminds you that you can change what you're doing right now. You do have that freedom of choice. The act of meditation—by making the mind more sensitive, more mindful, more inquisitive—puts you in a position where you can take more and more advantage of that freedom, for the sake of the happiness you want.

Cut, Cut, Cut

December 2, 2016

The chants we have in the evenings focus on very ordinary things—parts of the body, food, clothing, shelter, medicine; the fact that we're going to get sick, grow old, die. All very basic stuff. Nothing about emptiness, nothing about interconnectedness—no big abstractions, just concrete details.

There's a purpose in that. It's to remind us that if we want to understand our minds, we have to strip things down to the basic details, keep things as simple as possible.

Even the meditation is simplicity itself: Stay with your breath. Come next week to hear a Dhamma talk, and it will be about staying with the breath. Be right with what's present in front of you, and don't let things get complicated.

That's something we're very good at—we let things get very complicated in our minds. That's one of the meanings of *papañca*. We can add all kinds of details, all kinds of ins and outs to our thinking. But that takes us further and further away from the real issues: What are we doing right now that's causing us suffering? You have to learn how to look right at your own actions, and that requires you to strip things down, make things as simple as possible.

This is one of the reasons why the ajaans go into the forest, to go off to be on their own. They strip away as many issues as they can, to be confronted just by the basic facts of life, the basic facts of survival. If you're going to live in the forest, you need to have food, clothing, and shelter—very basic, minimal stuff. It's possible that you're going to get sick, so you're going to need medicine, too. And what do you do when those things are hard to come by? You're thrown back on your own mind.

Of course, if going into the forest were required for awakening, we shouldn't be here; we should be off someplace else. But it turns out that a lot of the ajaans, many of the ones you often don't hear about, actually gained their experience of awakening in monasteries. So it's not necessary that you strip everything down outside, but you *do* have to learn to strip things down in your own mind.

This is the trick of living in a monastery, living in a community like this: not getting all tied up in knots. Learning how to keep things basic, keep things simple, in your own mind at least. There may be other issues going on outside—there always seems to be a work project of some kind, and there's the constant work in the kitchen. But compared to the world out there, this is all pretty simple. Of course, we can make it as elaborate as we want in our minds, but that's against the purpose. The purpose is to keep things simple, keep things basic. And the more you can strip away the issues of the day, the

better.

When you sit and close your eyes, you want to have all those things just go away. Remind yourself: It's just you sitting here with the breath. Awareness with breath. Get even the narrative of "you" out of the way as much as possible. That means that you don't want the narrative to build up in the course of the day. You want to be able to learn how to disentangle things as they entangle themselves, so that there's not a lot of disentangling to do when you sit down. If a comment comes your way in the course of the day, remember the Buddha's instructions: A sound has made contact at the ear. You can know whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, and if you just leave it at that, then there are very few issues. And the fewer the issues that you create around the things outside, then the fewer issues there are to clutter up your mind as you sit down.

So it is possible to gain awakening in a monastery. We don't have to go out and live alone. But it requires a talent—the talent of stripping things down, taking things apart in the mind, so that things can be as simple as possible.

This is one of the reasons why we train the mind in concentration in order to gain insight. You're focused on very simple things here in the present moment: breath, awareness. And you'll find out that there are layers to the breath and there are layers to the awareness. As the Buddha said, you notice when there's an element of fabrication, as he calls it, which is the element you add through your intentions to create a specific experience out of, say, the simple fact that you're sitting here watching the breath. There's some bodily fabrication, which is the breath itself; there's a little bit of internal discussion, which is verbal fabrication; and there are some mental fabrications, which are the feelings and the perceptions—the labels you put on things. Those are all here. But they're all here around something really simple. It's when you keep things simple that you see things in action that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

You can start taking the layers apart. As soon as you see that you're adding an intentional element to what you're doing right here, right now, you can ask yourself, "Am I adding it in a way that's calming? Or am I adding it in a way that's stirring things up? How can I do it in a way that's calming?" You begin to see that some of the activities of the mind around the breath are unnecessary to keep it still, so you drop those. Some layers of the breath seem coarse and crude, so you drop those. Allow the breath to calm down. And as things grow calm, you can see the basic elements even more clearly. There's an intention here, and you have the act of attention. And there are perceptions—all these things that we use to create huge stories. Now they're centered on one thing. And when they're centered on one thing, you can see them as they happen.

During my first year as a monk, staying at Wat Asokaram at the beginning of the rains retreat, a lot of the young monks were coming in for just a three-month ordination. Here they were at a forest monastery, and yet their parents had bought them cheap robes down at the store, the color of Fanta orange. And so the first thing the young

monks did, as soon as they got ordained, was to go down to the dyeing shed and dye their robes a more forest-monk-like color. And for a couple of weeks that was all anybody could talk about: which mixture of red or orange worked best; how about a little bit of green; how much dark brown you wanted to add; what was the way to get the most impressive color for your robes. Some of the monks were not satisfied with what they got the first time around, so they would go back and dye the robes again. And you could see how people could take something very simple like that and make it a big issue.

The more I was focused on my breath, the more I could see how much people were adding to the problem. Fortunately, when I was ordained I did not have Fanta orange robes. I had already well-dyed robes, so I didn't have to get involved in the process. But watching them, it made me think of an experiment I had read about years before. They had taken a male pigeon and put it in a box with a female pigeon and clocked it to see how long it would take to begin its mating dance. Then they took the female pigeon out and put a male pigeon in, in her place, and clocked the first male pigeon to see how long it would take the dance to begin. And sure enough, it began its dance with the male pigeon. It took a little bit longer, but it would do it. Then they took the male pigeon out and they put a decoy in. This time it took a little bit longer, but then again, the first pigeon started doing his mating dance. And then they got objects that were less and less and less like pigeons, till they had a red ball. And again, it would take a little bit longer each time, but he would end up doing his mating dance. Then finally they took everything out of the box—and the pigeon was just there in the box, alone—to see what it would do. And eventually it started focusing in on one of the corners of the box and started doing its mating dance to the corner.

What that showed, of course, is that many of our activities have very little to do with what's actually there outside, and a lot to do with what we're fabricating from within. So the simpler you can make the outside, the more you can see what's going on inside, to see how much is actually being added from inside. And if you can start stripping it away —seeing that it's ridiculous, trying to mate with the corner of a box—you can gain some insight into your habits.

This is where we differ from pigeons. The pigeon couldn't reflect on itself, but we can reflect on ourselves to see where we're adding a lot of unnecessary drama, unnecessary complexity to our lives. We can start unraveling it.

In the beginning, it's like unraveling a big, tangled mass of string or a mass of yarn. It takes a lot of patience to pull out just one little strand. But as you keep pulling out the strands, pulling them out, pulling them out, pulling them out, the whole thing starts getting a lot less entangled, until you can see the act of intention very clearly in the mind. All too often in our normal way of living, our knowledge of our intentions is third- or fourth-hand. Something has made the decision inside and we seem to know about it only later. But as you strip down the various layers of perception and inner

conversations in the mind, and get the various layers of breath energies calmed down, calmed down, then you get more in touch with what is actually making the choice in the mind, what act is doing this. Where is it? What does it say?

As you get closer and closer to the real thing, you begin to realize that the basic messages are very, very simple. It's when they get sent up through the bureaucracy that they get elaborated. But actually, it all starts very simply: "What's next? What's next?" In other words, where are you going to focus your attention now? And what are you going to do with it? And when you actually see the intention or the act of attention in action, that's when you can start asking, "Is there something else? Is there another way of doing this, instead of making these incessant, idiotic comments all the time? Is there a state of mind that doesn't have to be disturbed by them? Can you stop them or allow them to stop?" And if you hit the right spot, everything begins to unravel.

So do your best to keep things as simple as possible. Strip things down as much as you can, even as you're sitting here meditating. Your narrative of how an hour of meditation should go: Can you drop that? Just be with this breath, this breath. Any other filaments of distracting thoughts: Can you just drop them, drop them, drop them away?

I know one ajaan who had an image of a knife in his mind. Any strand of thought that would begin to connect in his mind, he would think of the knife cutting it. Even dealing with the body: All the sensations and assumptions that kept his sense of the body connected, he would cut, cut, cut. With the body, some of the sensations are actually physical sensations connecting to one another, but there's an awful lot of mental activity that goes into connecting your sense of the body so that it's coherent. Can you think of just cutting—cut, cut, cut—through all those connections? When you cut through, when you strip things down, then just the basic elements are there, and you see that the real problems are there in the basic elements.

This is one of the reasons, as I said, why we have those chants that are so basic. Because they keep you focused on where the real issues are.

A Poker Mind

May 29, 2017

When you settle down with the breath, you're trying to bring three things together: your sense of the body, the feeling of pleasure, and your awareness. Those are the first three frames of reference that the Buddha talks about in establishing mindfulness. The fourth frame of reference, *dhammas*, is basically lists of qualities and other things to watch out for, to adjust, to help bring those first three things together more snugly. They include a list of hindrances: Those are qualities you want to abandon. The factors for awakening are qualities you want to develop. The fetters with regard to the six senses are to be abandoned as well. The five clinging-aggregates are activities to be comprehended. And then there are the four noble truths, which apply their duties to what you're doing right now. For instance, your main duty right now is to develop concentration because that's part of the path.

So in the beginning, we take the first three frames of reference—body, feeling, mind—and we try to bring them together. They may not fit quite together at first, which is why we have to do a lot of directed thought and evaluation: figuring out what's wrong with the breath, what's wrong with the mind. And when the breath does get comfortable, the next question is what you can do to maintain that sense of ease and then let it seep through the body. You want to end up with a sense of pleasure suffusing the body and awareness suffusing the body, so that they all become one. That's when you can really settle in.

You've got to maintain that sense of awareness-and-breath-and-pleasure until the pleasure starts feeling gross. Not gross in the sense of being disgusting, but just not subtle enough. You want something more subtle. Before the pleasure feels gross, you've got the rapture that starts feeling a bit too much. You let that die away. Then you let the pleasure die away, so that you've just got breath, equanimity, and awareness. And then the in-and-out breathing will gradually stop.

There will still be breath energy in the body. In fact, it's the connectedness of the breath energy in the body that allows your in-and-out breathing to stop. You don't force it to stop. It's just that when everything is so well connected in the body, there's no felt need to breathe. Sometimes this will be startling when you suddenly realize you haven't been breathing for a while. But as you get more and more used to it, you realize that you don't need to. When the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. You're not suppressing anything. You're just being very still and very balanced.

It's at this point where your sense of the "knower" comes to the fore. As the movement of the in-and-out breathing—which is what defines your sense of the body

—gets less and less and less, you're just left with a cloud of little sensation droplets. There's a vague sense of that cloud as having a body shape, but it's not very well defined. As Ajaan Fuang would advise his students, you have to wait until that point before you really start thinking about just being with the sense of knowing on its own. Prior to that point, you can have a sense of the knower, of what's simply aware of things, but it's not going to be stable.

As you go through all the beginning steps of concentration, you're trying to get a perception that you can hold onto. At first, there will be gaps in the perception. But as long as there's something obvious that you can focus on to sustain the perception, you can paper over the gaps. For example, you've got your breath as your main object. You're thinking about the breath and if the perception happens to lapse for a bit, the breath is still there coming in, going out. So you apply the perception again. It's what keeps you there. The two help each other along.

But if you're going to focus on the knower at that point, you don't have anything to focus on but the perception itself. When there's a gap in the perception, the focal point is gone. So you need practice in learning how to make your perceptions more and more continuous. This is what mindfulness is for. It stitches these perceptions together, so that you get to the point where the perceptions are constant regardless of whether the breath is going to be there or not. That's when you can let the breath go.

But it's not the case that you don't try to develop a sense of the observer as something separate from early on, simply that it's not going to be as prominent. It's not going to be as obvious. As stable. And it's not going to hit home in the same way. Only when the mind has settled down to the point where the breath has stopped and your sense of the body is beginning to dissolve and you've just got the awareness left, will it really hit you. There will come a realization at some point that "*This* is my awareness."

We're not talking about something faraway in a Dhamma book someplace. It's right here and it's very clear and very obvious. It's like tuning into a radio station. In the beginning, there will be some static because you haven't tuned quite precisely. But when you're well tuned and the radio is locked into the signal, the static is gone.

But you don't have to wait until that point to get at least some use out of this idea of the "knower." It starts very early on, as when the Buddha talks about dealing with unpleasant words from other people. If someone says something nasty, just remind yourself that an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear, and see if you can leave it at that. You don't stitch it into stories about who the person is or how bad their intentions are or how much you feel hurt by their words or whatever. There's just the contact at the ear and then you drop it. You're observing what's there, but you're training yourself not to add anything more to what's there. That's the role of the observer.

You can try to learn to do that with painful feelings as well. The feeling is there, but

can you allow it to be there without a lot of commentary, a lot of complaints? Can there be just the sensation without any thoughts about how long this sensation has been there or how much longer it's going to be here? You're not dragging yourself down. Just note: "There it is." Note that this sense of the knower will waver because it doesn't yet have the same solidity as it would if you were coming out of strong states of concentration. But it's helpful to keep in mind that this is something to aspire to.

It's like having a good poker face. Whatever comes up, you're not fazed and you don't show any signs of being fazed. Call it a poker mind: Whatever comes up, you figure that it's all equal. Part of your mind may say, "No, it's not equal at all," but for the time being you can borrow some of the Buddha's discernment. This is what the strength or the treasure of learning is. We're borrowing the Buddha's discernment to help us when we can't create discernment of our own.

Part of this lies in learning how to see feelings of pleasure and pain, as they come in, as being equal, as having equal value, so that the mind doesn't get turned by these things. What you're doing is developing patience and endurance, together with equanimity, and learning how to apply them in areas where you hadn't applied them before. You're also learning how to talk yourself into seeing these qualities as good things to have. Part of the mind may complain that you're being impassive, dull, not standing up for your rights, not defending yourself, whatever. But you have to learn how to say No to those voices. Learning how to be just with what's there and to let it go as it passes away: This is a skill you're going to need to develop. So work at it outside of the meditation, too.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, he would test me to see if my concentration was getting better. He would say things that he knew would usually get me upset. And in the beginning, I didn't realize what was happening and I'd get upset. But then I realized, "Oh, he's testing me to see how well I can maintain a sense of being impassive and solid in the face of whatever." And the advantage of that is that you learn how not to get fazed by criticism, especially from the people you respect. This doesn't mean that you brush it off, simply that you don't react emotionally. That allows you to look at the criticism to see exactly where it's right: "How can I benefit from the criticism?"

Then you can develop the attitude that Ajaan Lee talks about, where you can take anything that the world throws at you and see that it's got its good side as well as its bad. No matter how good it may seem in terms of the world, it has its bad side. Wealth, fame, praise: Those things you've got to watch out for. At the same time, the things that the world says are bad have their good side as well. Material loss, loss of status, criticism: You can learn from loss, you can learn from criticism, but you learn best when you're not reacting, when you can develop this sense of just knowing that whatever's there is simply there. You're not getting carried away by all the embroidery that you tend to add to these things.

So bring that attitude to your meditation. It helps a lot. To begin with, when things

aren't going well, you don't get upset. You tell yourself, "Well, this is a job that's going to take some time. I've been following my defilements for a long time. I've been following my cravings. They've been leading me around by the nose for who knows how long. It's going to take a while to undo those habits."

Then, as things start going well, make sure you don't get excited. All too often, it happens that the mind finally settles down, it feels really good, you get excited—and you've lost it. Some people will say, "Well, it's because I've been trying too hard or I like it too much." It's not that you like it too much. After all, it's what you want to happen in the meditation. It's just that you have to learn how not to be so reactive. Say: "Oh. There's that. Oh. There's that." If you get excited about a little bit of concentration, just think of what would happen if something even better than that came along. You'd get really excited and lose that, too.

So one of the skills you have to develop as better and better things develop in the meditation is to say, "Oh. There's this," and hold the mind in check so that you can observe what happens after "this." And you learn how to observe it better.

This is what the Buddha told Rahula—to make his mind like earth—from the very beginning. Whatever gets poured on the earth, the earth doesn't react. You want to have that same quality of solid non-reactivity: That's what's meant by being with the observer, being with the knower. It's a construct you've constructed out of your perceptions—it's not the awakened mind or anything—but it's something you want to develop as one of the fruits of your concentration, so that whatever happens, you have this place to resort to.

Then it becomes a good basis for your discernment, because your discernment is going to be seeing connections between causes and effects, and sometimes you'll be seeing connections you don't like at all. In other words, you see something really stupid you're doing and you should have known better. Now you realize, it's not necessary and it is stupid. And if you don't get upset by that fact, then you can let it go.

Ultimately, there is another kind of consciousness that lies on the other side of concentration and that comes as a result of the discernment. That's something else entirely. This is a point that so often gets confused. People think you get this sense of just the knower or just "being the knowing" and that somehow you've reached the unconditioned. It's still very, very conditioned, because you've got a name for it and you can stay with it only as long as you stick with the name: the perception you apply to it.

There was a Western monk who asked Ajaan Chah about this one time. Everybody there at the monastery was assuming that the knower and the awakened awareness were the same thing. So this monk, who liked to ask questions, asked Ajaan Chah point blank, and Ajaan Chah said, "No, of course not. They're two very different things."

So it's important to keep that distinction in mind, and to develop this sense of the knower as one of your skills as a meditator, so that you can maintain a poker mind. You

can be impassive and watch things clearly for what they are, and then watch clearly as things move from one step to the next step in the mind. This requires that you not get excited by the first step and miss all the ones that come after.

So try to make this knower like earth, in the sense that it's non-reactive. You can make it like space, in the sense that anything can go through it without disturbing it and without leaving a trace. Yet at the same time, you're not dull and unperceptive like a clod of earth, and you're not spacey. You're very perceptive but unmoved by things. Only then can you really see things for what they are and how they act, to the point where you can work your way past them.

Focused on Results

March 1, 2016

Sometimes you hear that when you practice you shouldn't be focused on getting results. The extreme version of that idea is that meditation should be totally purposeless, totally useless. Of course, when you hear people saying that they meditate without any purpose, without any sense that it's going to be good for anything, they're hoping for a result: They're hoping to impress you.

Every action has a result. And we act for the sake of results. The question of being focused on getting results comes down to the fact that there are skillful ways and unskillful ways of being focused that way. So it's good to know the distinction.

After all, the Buddha said that wisdom begins with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's looking for a result right there. Long-term results, lasting results: That's what we want. The question is, "How do we get those lasting results?"

Two wrong ways of being focused on results that get in the way are, one, wanting whatever you do to give good results and, two, wanting to have the results right away.

The first case is simply a kind of narcissism: You decide that you want to do something and you want the results to be good, you get upset when the results aren't good, and you complain. Or you try to get everybody to agree that, yes, those really are good results. But you don't learn anything that way. You just try to force your will on things and, of course, things are going to push back. You can keep it up for a while, but there comes a point where it all breaks down—and you suffer.

The second unskillful way of being focused on results is basically impatience. We do something good and we want the results right away, without taking into consideration the fact that we've been doing things unskillfully for a long time, and some of those things are going to be giving their results, so that the new and the old are going to be mixed up together. So we have to learn how to accept that. Sometimes it takes a while to develop the skill that we need. And it takes a while, once we've finally got the skill, for the results really to get solid and dependable.

So when you find yourself frustrated in the practice, step back a bit and ask yourself, "Are you being too impatient?" Now, patience doesn't mean that you just sit back and be passive. You have to actively do good things, to try to work on developing your skill. But you want to learn the powers of endurance that allow you to develop something that's going to take a while. We're in this for the long term. And we have to learn how to deal with long fallow periods when we're putting in effort, and the practice is something

we're doing every day, every day, and yet the results aren't quite what we want.

And one of the important keys to having patience is learning to have a good sense of humor about all this.

There's an interesting passage in *Slaughterhouse Five,* where the main character, an American prisoner of war, visits the British in their prisoner-of-war camp. And it's a very different camp. The Americans are sitting around moping and depressed and pretty hopeless, even plotting revenge on one another, whereas the British are all well-shaven, all well-looked-after. They put on plays to entertain themselves. In other words, they learn how to find what is enjoyable in the midst of a long-term project, even when the odds seem against them.

You hear that story about Shackleton and his crew going down to the coast of Antarctica, not even making it to the coast: getting caught in the ice, and their ship gets crushed. The men have to make their way all the way across to the island of Georgia. It takes a long time.

And he doesn't lose anybody. As he said later, a lot of it had to do with the fact that everybody was disciplined. They knew what had to be done and, even though things looked hopeless, they just did it. They knew that if there was any hope at all, it would depend on their actions. So Shackleton apparently was really good at keeping people's spirits up as best as possible.

One of my favorite stories of ships being caught in the ice was a case where they were looking for the Franklin expedition, which had been a big disaster in an attempt to find the Northwest Passage. Ship after ship was sent to find at least the remains of the expedition, if not the living men.

One of the ships sent out in search went around Cape Horn and up through the Bering Strait, to attack the Northwest Passage from the west. They got stuck in the ice north of Alaska and had to winter over.

So what did they do? The ship's captain decided to teach all the men how to play billiards. That was back in the days when billiards was an upper class sport. But he said, "Well, forget that. Get everybody on board playing billiards." So they went out on the ice and built a billiard table out of ice. And he taught everybody how to pay billiards. That's how they kept themselves entertained throughout the Arctic winter.

You read about the Fram, the Norwegian ship that was stuck in the ice. They actually would print a little newspaper with entertaining stories. People would put on plays and there'd be entertainment on a regular basis.

All of which shows that if you're going to go through fallow periods, you have to keep yourself entertained. If your sense of humor is good, and you see the irony in your situation, whatever it is, that attitude can keep you buoyed up, so that even though the results aren't coming as fast as you want them to, you give yourself the strength to keep on putting in the effort.

There's a similar passage in *Joseph and his Brothers,* where Joseph has been caught, accused of an attempted adultery, and thrown in prison. So he decides to entertain himself by interpreting dreams. He starts by interpreting his own dreams, and then interpreting the dreams of his wardens.

Eventually, of course, the Pharaoh has his great dream. And Joseph's talent as a dream interpreter ultimately gets him brought into the presence of the Pharaoh, and he gives the right interpretation. So what started out as a pastime actually became his key to getting out.

You look at the forest masters. All of them have really good sense of humor, the kind of humor where they could laugh in a good-natured way at their own mistakes. That's what helped them overcome not only impatience, but also whatever traces of narcissism they might have had. They needed that sense of humor because they'd be stuck in the forest—and it's not the case that when you get out there and you finally have no more responsibilities, your practice just goes lickity split.

A lot of us think that because we have this or that obstacle in our daily lives, that's what explains why our practice isn't progressing. But if finally we had 100% of our time to give to the practice, everything would go really well.

Well, it doesn't always happen that way. A lot of times you're out in the forest and nothing seems to be working—because you're not there alone: You've brought all your memories of the past along with you. And you've got to learn how to deal with them. So you learn how to find some humor in the situation, keep yourself entertained in ways that are in line with the Dhamma. This is how the ajaans became the ajaans. Their senses of humor saw them through.

So we do focus on results. We focus on acting in a skillful way and learning from the results of our actions. That's how the Buddha found awakening, and that's how we're all going to find our own awakening: by being very clear about what we're doing, the results we're getting, and what we can do better. So in this way, we *are* focused on results.

What this means is that you have to put your preferences aside. That old Zen saying that the Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences: It doesn't mean you just give up preferences of all kinds. You prefer to get skillful results and you prefer to gain awakening. What it means is that you don't stick to your old ways of doing things, saying that "This is the way I'm going to do things, this is the kind of person I am, and this is how it has to be, and I want to get good results that way." They don't come simply because you want them to. Narcissism is not the Great Way.

You learn from your actions—that's why we're focused on our actions and on their results. Given that the principle of kamma is quite complex, the results may not come as quickly as we'd like. That's where patience and maturity come in. If you're patient about learning from your actions and learning from your results, and mature in having a

good sense of humor about your mistakes, that's when your focus is on target.

So being focused on results is a really necessary part of the practice. It's simply a matter of learning how to do it right.

Look after Your Baby

October 1, 2016

All too often it happens that when you sit down to concentrate on the breath, you stay with the breath for a little bit and then you're off someplace else. You come back, you stay with it a little bit longer, but then you're off again. This happens so many times that you begin to get discouraged. You think, "Maybe this concentration is no good," so you throw it away. Instead, you should think that it's like having a baby. You feed it. But then it cries. Then you have to change and wash the diapers. Then you have to feed it again. And it cries. But you don't throw the baby away. You just realize that it needs extra work, continuous work. It's the same with your concentration.

You need to have a sense of the value even of little bits of concentration, because those are the things that are going to grow into stronger concentration. So you keep at it. You keep coming back, coming back. You fuel your ability to come back with confidence and conviction. And if your conviction is weak, you have to strengthen it, reminding yourself that other people have done this in the past. They're human beings. You're a human being. They did it. You can do it, too.

And you have to strengthen your mindfulness, your ability to remember that you're going to stay here. Otherwise, a little curtain falls down in the mind, like the curtain when you're watching a play. They move from one scene to another. They put the curtain down. Then the curtain comes up, and you're someplace else entirely. You have to watch out for the mind's tendency to put that curtain down, because that's what makes you forget as you go from one scene to the next in your mind.

So make up your mind that when the mind is going to wander off, you want to know, because if you keep telling yourself, "It's not going to wander off, it's not going to wander off," then when it *does* wander off, part of the mind has to deceive another part of the mind to do that. But if you're alert to the fact that it will wander off and you make up your mind that you want to see the steps or stages, you begin to peer through the curtain. You see that when the mind is getting ready to go, it first sends out a little feeler for something else. And when that feeler attaches to something, it goes, like a spider casting its web filament to see if it will catch something. So watch out for the filament. Watch out for the feeler.

The mind may be with the breath, or part of the mind is with the breath, but it's not the whole thing. Something else is already sneaking off to go someplace else. And you want to see that. In other words, you have to get the mind so that it doesn't keep lying to itself. So remember, the mind will slip off, but you want to understand why it does that. And when you can understand it, then you can prevent it.

So even though your concentration may be weak, don't throw it away. Don't get frustrated with it. Learn to value the bits of time when you *are* with the breath. If you made it to three breaths, okay, pat yourself on the back. Then say, "Okay, can I make it to four? How about five?" It may seem very meager in terms of progress, but the progress can grow exponentially. In other words, it goes from three to four and then to eight and then to sixteen, then to 256. It keeps multiplying as you get a better understanding of how the mind moves from one object to another.

All of this comes under the list of the Buddha's teachings on the five strengths. You have to strengthen your conviction. You have to strengthen your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment.

Those strengths are listed in a row—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—but that doesn't mean that you start with just the beginning ones. All five have to support one another. So look to see where you're lacking. Are you lacking conviction in yourself? Are you lacking conviction in the Buddha's teachings? Are you lacking conviction in your persistence? What does it mean to be persistent? It means understanding that there are some things you want to protect, other things you want to get rid of. So even though the concentration in the beginning may be small and weak, you've got to protect it. Don't throw it away.

To make another comparison, it's like planting a tree. You find the seeds, and the seeds can seem very small. But think about the redwoods up north. They come from tiny, tiny seeds, and yet they're the tallest trees on Earth. So you take the tiny seed of concentration and you plant it. And you look after it. And make sure that all the conditions are right in terms of your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, and your discernment. And whether the tree grows quickly or slowly, that's the tree's business. Those redwoods, for example, do grow very slowly. But they can do things that other trees can't do. They can reach higher. They can actually support other trees inside their crown. It's the same with your concentration. Your concentration may be slow to grow, but slow-growing concentration actually has its advantages and can sometimes do things that fast-growing concentration can't.

There are people who find it very easy to close their eyes, go, *buddho, buddho,* and bang, they're in concentration. The problem is that they don't understand what's happened. And so then, on the days when they *can't* get the mind to settle down, they don't know what to do. But if you've gone through all the various obstacles that the mind sets up for itself and you learn how to get past them, then even on days when the mind is not necessarily inclined to want to settle down, you know how to get it past those obstacles, because you've had experience. That kind of slow-growing concentration is like the redwoods with other trees growing up in their crowns. It can support all kinds of insights, all kinds of good qualities in the mind.

So if your concentration is weak, okay, work with your weak concentration. Don't throw it away. Don't say, "I want a better concentration," and discard what you've got.

It's like getting a baby that cries and saying, "I want a baby that doesn't cry," so you throw it out. Or, "I want a baby that doesn't have to be fed," and you throw it out. The human race would have died a long time ago if that's how we treated our children. So think of your concentration as a child. In the beginning, it'll require lots and lots of attention. We'd like to think that once we hook onto the breath, we can put everything on automatic pilot and just coast through the hour. But concentration, especially the kind that fosters discernment, doesn't have automatic pilot. It requires alertness. It requires mindfulness. Just as when you drive, you have to be alert all the time, mindful all the time.

So don't expect that the mind's going to get in place and just stay there without your having to care for it. Actually, it's in the caring for it that the concentration actually grows and becomes stronger. So the mind that says, "I simply want a place to rest and I don't want to be bothered": That's the mind that just wants to go to sleep. However, to say, "I want to rest in concentration so that I can gain the strength to get to work," is a sign that you realize there's work to be done and you have the conviction that you can do it. If you're lacking in conviction, do what you can to talk yourself into *wanting* to do this. Talk yourself into feeling that you are competent to do this.

To bolster your concentration, think of those four other strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and discernment. If the concentration is weak, you have to strengthen those as well, and the concentration will become stronger along with them. Then the little bits and pieces of concentration begin to connect. Not that they flow on their own: You have to do the connecting. But then as they do connect, they gain strength. The concentration gains a kind of momentum. That's when it requires less and less work. It doesn't require less mindfulness or alertness—those have to be constant—but the effort that gets put in gets easier over time.

Again, it's like raising a child. In the beginning, you have to do everything for it: feed it, clothe it, clean it, comfort it. But after a while, the child begins to feed itself, clean itself, look after itself. You still have to watch over it. After all, it is your child and it's still not an adult. But it's not as difficult as in the first stage when it was a baby. So even though concentration may be difficult in the beginning, don't think it's going to always be that way. It'll mature. But for it to mature, you have to give it what it needs. Give it your full attention. Be alert. Be mindful. Stick with it. Keep coming back, coming back. Keep encouraging yourself. And that's how your feeble concentration becomes strong.

Vitakka & Vicara

December 24, 2017

Vitakka and *vicara* are two Pali words that mean thinking. They're classified as verbal fabrication. In other words, you engage in these two activities—thinking *of* something first and then thinking *about* it, or directing your thoughts to a topic and then commenting on it—and then you break into speech. Without having had those verbal thoughts in the mind, there would be no external verbal action. They're the mental activities that precede speech.

They're also two of the elements or factors in the first jhana.

Some people say there shouldn't be any thinking in jhana—that when the Buddha was talking about vitakka and vicara in the context of jhana, he meant something else. But if that were true, he would have been a pretty careless teacher. Usually, when he used his words in a special way, he would take pains to explain the special meaning. But in his descriptions of the first jhana, there's none of that.

In the similes he gives for the four jhanas, the image he gives for vitakka and vicara in the first jhana is the activity of a bathman. In those days, they didn't have bars of soap. If you were going to take a bath, you needed a bathman to mix soap powder with water to make a kind of dough that you would then rub over your body. The bathman would have to knead the water into the dough so that the entire ball of dough would be moist, and yet it wouldn't drip.

This corresponds, when you're in the first jhana, to taking the sense of rapture and pleasure that builds up around the breath and learning to work it all the way through the body, so that the entire body is saturated with rapture and pleasure. You have to direct your thoughts to questions like: Where is the pleasure to begin with? How do you maintain it? How do you work it through the body? Where is it blocked? And how can you work it through those blockages? Those questions count as evaluation.

The Buddha doesn't explain how to work the rapture and pleasure through the body, but Ajaan Lee fills in this blank by framing the issue in terms of the breath energy. You're thinking about the breath and you're evaluating the breath: Where is it comfortable? Where is it not comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to change it? If it is comfortable, what can you do to maintain it? And then what do you do with that pleasure? How do you get it to spread through the body?

You can think of it going with the breath energy down the spine and out the legs. Going down the center of the front of the body. Going all throughout the head down through the arms. Or sometimes you can think of it coming up. If your back is feeling

weak, think of the energy coming up the spine instead of going down: from the base of the feet on up through the legs, up and then through the back.

This is something you have to evaluate on your own because you're trying to get the mind to stay together with the object. You're trying to get the breath and that sense of pleasure to fill the body. Getting the breath to fill the body is a very good way of allowing rapture and pleasure to saturate the body.

And you want your awareness to fill the body as well. In fact, you want all these three things to come together in a full way. This is why these three things—body, feelings, and mind—are the first three frames of reference when you're establishing mindfulness. You want everything to fit together; you want all these three things to fill one another thoroughly.

Then you comment on it some more. That's what the evaluation basically is. You comment on it to yourself to see: Is this going the way you want, or is it not? You have to apply these fabrications not only to the breath, but also to the mind. What is your mind doing right now? If it's slipping off, is the problem with the breath or with the mind itself? Where is it slipping out to feed? If you find the mind feeding on something that's not good, how do you bring it back to get it to feed on the breath?

This is another activity of directed thought and evaluation. You want to get the mind snug with the object. Sometimes that means making adjustments to the object, sometimes to the mind. It's like getting two pieces of wood to fit together snugly. Sometimes you have to sand this piece of wood, sometimes you have to chip a little something off of that piece of wood, until finally they fit. When they fit together snugly, you can put the thinking aside.

But it's always there waiting in the background. Because as the meditation goes along, when you've settled into a good state of concentration long enough, you want to ask yourself what to do to move on to a more refined level of concentration. Sometimes the opposite happens: The mind swerves off the topic, and you need to be able to notice that. You have to learn how to talk yourself into coming back. This is also an activity of verbal fabrication.

This is where the Buddha gets into what he calls the fabrications of exertion, which, in some cases, have to be used to overcome the causes of suffering. As he notes, some of the causes of suffering in the mind require nothing more than that you look at them and see that they're really not worth going for. As a result, they simply fall to the side. With other causes, though, you can look at them and they just stare right back. There's a part of the mind that's resistant to letting them go, and so they don't fall away so easily. This is where you have to use all three fabrications of exertion: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Verbal fabrication, of course, is directed thought and evaluation. You use this in conjunction with all the other fabrications: working with the breath, which is bodily fabrication; working with your perceptions, the images and individual words that have

power over the mind—which are mental fabrications; and working with feelings of pleasure and pain in the body, which are mental fabrications as well.

Verbal fabrication, though, is the primary factor that adjusts the other two. You have to evaluate the situation and ask yourself, when the mind is going for something that's off target, how do you bring it back? With some of the food we feed on, it's easy to see that when you eat this kind of food you get sick. So you tell yourself that it's not really worth it, and that's enough for you to give it up. But with other kinds of food, it's harder. In some cases, that's because the effects take a long time to appear. In other cases, you're so used to eating that kind of food every day that you don't see any connection between how the mind is reacting to an object and how it's connected to the way you're feeding on something.

Like sugar: People who eat sugar every day are pretty used to what it feels like to eat sugar every day and they take it as normal. To realize that it's not normal, that the body doesn't need to feel that way, you need to wean yourself off of the sugar. That requires some thinking in the long-term. What are the long-term results of feeding in this way? And you have to force yourself to give it up. The results of giving it up at first may be unpleasant, but after a while you get to the point where sugar smells bad. Then you realize, "Oh! It really is having a bad effect on the body." But you had to force yourself to get to that point.

So in some cases, when you're doing directed thought and evaluation about something that you're obsessed with or something you're holding on to, you have to think about long-term consequences. And be willing to talk to yourself to remind yourself every day—every time you feel tempted to follow that particular line of thought—that its long-term consequences are bad.

There are other kinds of food, though, where you actually see the harm but you don't care. Back when I was teaching at Chiang Mai University, a group of us would get together once a week. We'd fan out through the city of Chiang Mai to get northern Thai food. We knew where they sold the best barbequed chicken, the best *nam phrik ong,* the best *laab myang nya:* all the other really good northern Thai dishes. So we'd fan out and get all the best dishes and then bring them back to a spot to have a picnic. And then the next day everyone would get diarrhea. And then the next week we'd do it all over again.

A lot of things that the mind focuses on and gets obsessed with are just like that. You see the consequences but you don't care. You say, "I'm much more attracted to the taste of northern Thai food. I can put up with the diarrhea." That's what you think. So in this case you have to really think about the consequences to see the fact that they really are harmful. That requires extra thinking. You realize you have to contemplate the allure that you find, say, in northern Thai food, and the consequences it's going to have for your body. Is the taste really worth it?

A part of the mind may say, "Yes," and that's the part you have to question. Look

around for other consequences that you may not be noticing until finally you decide that, no, it's not worth it, and, yes, you do care.

This is why the Buddha stresses heedfulness so much. You have to learn how to think heedfully. You don't want to expose yourself to dangers, because there are some kinds of diarrhea where the germ that's causing it can get into your liver and have long-term consequences.

I remember meeting someone who'd been to Thailand years before I got there. He had been with the Peace Corps and he got some kind of intestinal bug that had plagued him for five years afterward. So to wean myself off of northern Thai food, I had to think about him and his intestinal bug before I could say, "Okay. It's not worth it: five years of bad health for just a fleeting taste."

There are other kinds of food where you can't even imagine not eating it. This, again, is where directed thought and evaluation come in to help you to expand your imagination. Years back, there was the book, *Material World,* which had pictures of all the things you might find in an average household in different countries of the world. One of the houses was in Bhutan. The family had an open pit toilet right under the house. And of course, the flies in the pit toilet would buzz up and get on the food that everybody was eating. Everybody had diarrhea every day and they didn't imagine there was any other way for them to live. It would have taken someone to come in and show them, "Move the toilet away, close it up, and your health is going to improve."

Sometimes when you find yourself obsessed with something, you have to ask yourself, "Is there some other way of thinking about this? Can you imagine another way of thinking about it?" This is especially important when we have very strong opinions about things. We're sure we're right about them. But then you have to ask yourself, "Okay, holding onto my rightness about that particular opinion: Where does it get me? If it gets me upset, is it worth holding onto? If it gets me involved in arguments, is it worth holding onto?" Sometimes yes, but a lot of times no. So you have to imagine what it would be like not to hold onto it.

There's a story Ajaan Chah tells about a group of four guys going through a forest who hear a rooster crow. Three of them put their heads together and say, "Let's say that it's a chicken. See what the other guy says." They tell the other guy that it's a chicken, and he says, "No. Of course not. It's a rooster." And they say "No. It's a chicken." He gets incredulous: "How could a chicken crow like that?" "Well, it has a mouth, doesn't it?" they say. They go back and forth, back and forth, and the guy who's convinced that it's a rooster—and he's really right—gets so upset that he starts crying. In his case, holding onto his rightness was actually a source of suffering. So in cases like that, you use your directed thought and evaluation to ask yourself, "What am I getting from holding onto these things? And what are the consequences?"

This is especially important as you start meditating. You find that with your

increased powers of concentration and your greater time alone, you can get obsessed with things. You can be very right about them and yet you suffer. This is where you have to step back and ask yourself, "Okay. What is this activity that I'm doing? Where is this taking me?" It's another function of the establishing of mindfulness: looking at the activities of the mind and asking yourself, "Where does this particular activity fit in the framework that the Buddha gives for dealing with skillful and unskillful thoughts?" And "unskillful," here, doesn't necessarily mean wrong. You can be very right about something but you can hold onto your rightness in the wrong way. You have to be especially careful when your increased powers of concentration get you more and more obsessed.

So directed thought and evaluation really do mean thinking about things. They're not just an unfortunate wobbling of the mind, as one teacher once described them. They serve a real purpose in getting the mind into concentration and keeping it there. They also help take the mind to higher levels of concentration, when you use them to analyze a particular level of concentration to see what's still causing unnecessary stress in that level, so that you can drop the cause. And they help to protect the mind if it slips off and starts getting into what Ven. Ananda called the jhana of anger, the jhana of lust, or the jhana of fear. These *are* kinds of jhana, but when you evaluate the effect they're having on the mind, you realize that they're not on the right path.

So as you're practicing concentration, you have to learn to raise questions, i.e., evaluate what you're doing, what the results are, so that you can peel yourself away from the causes of suffering that are especially attractive: The ones where you're right, but the rightness doesn't get you anywhere.

When the Buddha talks about right view, it's all about what you're doing that's causing suffering right now. As for the rightness of issues out in the world, those are put aside. What can you do to put an end to the suffering you're causing yourself? That's what right view is all about. In this way, everything gets brought back inside.

Even though in the description of the establishings of mindfulness, the Buddha sometimes talks about being aware of bodies outside or feelings outside or mind states outside, it's all ultimately meant to reflect back inside. You see other bodies dying and you realize that what's happening to them reflects back on you: "I, too, am subject to dying." You see other people when they're greedy, when they're obsessed with fear, when they're angry, and you reflect back on yourself: "What am I like when I do those things? Do I look like that?" You see how ugly it is in other people. How harmful it is. That's how you look, too. In this way, you learn to look at others in a way that gets you to think about yourself in a skillful way, to bring everything back inside.

What this means is that meditation is not always about stopping your thinking. It first requires that you learn how to think properly, so that you can get a good perspective on what you're doing that's causing your suffering and how you can put an end to it. That's when thinking is useful.

And when that thinking has brought you to a point where the mind and the body and the feelings of well-being all come together, filling the body, then you can put the thinking aside. But be ready to pick it up again when you need it again, to evaluate your concentration so as to deepen it and protect it. In this way, directed thought and evaluation are an integral part of the path, bringing together all the elements of the path, including mindfulness, concentration, right view, and right resolve.

So learn how to put your thinking to good use before you think about letting it go.

When it's Hard to Settle Down

January 17, 2017

When the mind has trouble settling down with the breath, you want to check to see whether the problem is with the mind or with the breath—or with your perceptions of the mind or of the breath.

The first problem, the mind: Sometimes you have lots of issues that are unresolved, and simply putting them aside and trying to focus on the breath is not enough to get past them. You have to think them through. This means thinking about them in a way that's not your usual way of thinking about them, because your usual way of thinking about them is what's causing the problem. And you can't just say, "Well, I'll stop thinking altogether and that'll solve the problem." You have to first think in a way that's going to take some of the burdens off your heart. Then you can settle down.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I found a lot of issues from my family life and childhood, college years, whatever, coming up in my meditation. With some of them, I could talk them over with him. Some of them he just thought were very strange. I began to realize that if he got that strange look in his eye when I'd tell him about one of my problems, this was a very American problem and I'd have to work through it myself. But I noticed that when he was dealing with the problems that he was familiar with, the solution was always to think about them from a new angle, based on a combination of understanding kamma and understanding goodwill.

The fact of kamma doesn't mean that people suffer because they deserve to suffer. That's not the right understanding of kamma at all. Kamma means basically that people have lots of actions in their personal history, good and bad. It's like having a field filled with seeds. Some of the seeds have been buried there for a long time and they're not going to sprout for a long time. Others are ready to sprout at the slightest provocation. What you see at any one moment are the seeds that are sprouting—and particularly, the ones that you're watering with your own attention, your own interest in them, whether they're good or bad. So the fact that something bad is sprouting right now doesn't mean that everything in the field is bad. It's simply the current crop. And how do you make sure that there are good seeds in there? Well, you plant them.

That's the other aspect of kamma that's useful to think about if you find yourself trying to go back and straighten out everything in your past, trying to settle things as to who's right, who's wrong, where the blame can be assigned or whatever. From the point of view of kamma and rebirth, try thinking back, back, back through all those many lifetimes. There's no starting point. There's no way you could settle the scores. So you just have to say, "Well, it's part of the human condition that we all have good and bad

seeds in our background. Right now, though, you have the opportunity to plant some good seeds. And in planting the good seeds, you make it a lot easier for the mind to withstand the effects of the past bad seeds when they sprout."

As the Buddha said, it's like throwing a lump of salt into some water. If you have just a little cup of water, then you can't drink the water because the lump of salt makes it too salty. But if you have a large river, and the water in the river is clean, then when you throw the lump of salt in, you can still drink the water. The large river here stands for a mind that's trained—specifically, trained in the brahmaviharas: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—learning to extend these attitudes to all people, all beings, both for their benefit and for yours. For their benefit, sometimes you simply extend goodwill to other beings and they'll feel it. There are other times when they won't feel it, but at least the fact of having developed that attitude within yourself means you're more likely to be trustworthy in your interactions with others.

And you make it an immeasurable quality of the mind. In other words, you don't measure out your goodwill, saying, "I'm going to give this much to this person and this much to that person, and deny it to that person over there." Give everything you've got to everybody. And it comes back as a kind of safety. As the Buddha said, this is your wealth as a meditator; this is your protection. It's your gift to the whole world. You can make it specific, sending it to specific people you know are suffering, but you also want to be able to extend it to everybody.

And taking that point of view—everybody—you start thinking about the chant that we repeat often: All living beings are the owners of their actions. And that other chant: subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. The Thai translation is that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal. The original sutta where that reflection is found goes on to say that this applies not only to you. It applies to everybody. If you think about the whole world, the whole cosmos, everybody lives in a state where aging, illness, and death are normal. And when you can think in these terms, it helps to relieve a lot of old burdens or the desire to settle old scores. There's already enough suffering as it is. Why would you want to add more? That larger perspective makes it easier to finally settle in and get centered with the breath.

There are other helpful reflections as well. Sometimes reflecting on the Buddha is helpful. Here's somebody who had everything in life but he realized that having everything in life is not enough. There's got to be something better than the normal stuff of what they call "everything in life." He went out, sacrificed a lot of years of his life, went through a lot of suffering, but finally came across something that was more than everything. It was the deathless.

And he came back and taught it for free. It's hard to find that sort of person now. Just this evening we got a brochure from a publisher offering at least 30 or 40 mindfulness books, all for sale. This is what people do nowadays: They learn a little bit about mindfulness and they find a way to make money off of it. Whereas the Buddha

knew a lot more about mindfulness and he didn't charge at all. His teachings were free. He walked all over India for 45 years, teaching whoever could be taught. People of all kinds. So this is the type of person who found this path we're on. Sometimes thinking about that can give you the energy you need to practice.

Or you can reflect on the Sangha and stories in the Canon of members of the Sangha, many of whom suffered an awful lot and got very discouraged in the practice but were able to pick themselves up and finally gain awakening. That can be inspiring, too.

So there are various reflections you can engage in. Sometimes you can spend the whole hour in those reflections, and it's not a wasted hour. You're learning to re-think the issues in your mind from the Buddha's point of view. These are some of his ways of thinking that he recommends for all of us, ways of thinking that help take the sting out of our suffering. It's all part of right view and right resolve, all part of the path.

Learning how to re-think your issues is an important skill in the meditation. You look at the values you've picked up from society and you realize that a lot of them are not designed to help relieve suffering. They actually pour more suffering on. This is why it's in your own best interest to learn to re-think things, re-cast the narrative, until the mind is ready to settle down.

Then you look at the breath. Sometimes, if you still can't settle down, that's where the problem is: The breath is not comfortable. There may be pains in the body. Learn how to breathe through the pains. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the flow of energy in the body. If you can't feel the flow, just ask yourself where it's tense or tight in the body, and relax those spots. Make a comparison. If you think there's some tension in your right shoulder, compare it with your left shoulder. If the left shoulder seems more relaxed, see if you can create that same relaxed sensation in the right shoulder. Go down through the body this way.

Often an issue that seems to be an issue of the breath is actually an issue of your perception of the breath or your perception of the mind in relationship to the breath. When I was first meditating, Ajaan Fuang would say, "Watch out for your mind so that if you see it's going to slip off into distraction, you work more with the breath." Well, I couldn't believe that you could see yourself slip off into distraction. You either weren't distracted or you were. So I asked him, "How can you see if the mind's going to slip off?" He replied that there are warning signals. And as I watched, sure enough, that was the case. The mind is like an inchworm. It comes to the edge of a leaf and part of it's still on the leaf but another part of it is waving around, looking for the next leaf. The next leaf comes by and—pop—it's off.

It's the same with the mind. Part of it may be with the breath, but part of it starts looking around. If you're really alert, you begin to see, "Oh, these are the warning signals. This is the mind about to slip off." And when it's about to slip off, a lot of the

problem is that the breath is no longer interesting. So turn around to see what's going on in the breath that you can work with. Learn how to take more of an interest in the breath. See if there are any pains in the body. Can you use the breath to work around them, work through them, dissolve the tension around them? If there's some stiffness or a sense of blockage, see if the breath can help. It gives you something to get interested in.

Or you can ask yourself where in the body is the greatest sensitivity to the breath. Often it's the area around the heart. Does it feel really good when you breathe in right down in that area or does it just feel kind of bland? If it feels bland, ask yourself what would be really satisfying there, what would feel really, really good there, and see how the body responds. Sometimes it'll involve thinking of the breath coming in from another direction than you normally think it comes. And in releasing whatever tension there may be around the heart, you may find other patterns of tension showing up in the body as well, and they can get released, too.

So there's a lot to explore here. If you're bored with the breath, it means you're not looking, or not looking carefully enough.

There's also a common perception of the mind that can get in the way: the idea that the mind is only in one spot. Actually, you have an awareness that fills the body already. It's a background awareness, and then there's one spot where you're focused. What you're trying to do as you work with the concentration and develop a whole-body awareness is to try to connect that sense of being focused with the background, so that you begin to see it's all part of the same awareness. Even though there may be one spot that's more prominent than the others in the awareness, it's connected with the background awareness, too.

One way to build up to this is to think of two spots at once—say, in the head and at the base of the spine—and of a line connecting the two. Make yourself aware of the whole line, and then from there you can give the line more of a three-dimensional quality so that it begins to fill out the rest of the body, while your focused awareness and your background awareness all become one.

It's when the mind fills the body like this that it doesn't have any extra hands to grab onto anything else. If the mind is only in one spot, it's like holding onto a post with one hand and then spinning around and trying to grab whatever comes by with your other hand. There's a lot you can grab that way. In other words, you can be with the breath, you can be with *buddho,* but other parts of the mind are grabbing onto this, grabbing onto that. But if you're aware of your whole body and you try and make your awareness three-dimensional like this, then there are no extra hands to grab onto anything. Everything is full. Your sense of your hands fills your hands; your sense of your head fills your head; the awareness fills the body. It's as if your awareness has a shape like your body and all the parts are together, all the parts line up. When you think in these ways, you can actually get the mind into concentration.

When we talk about keeping the mind in concentration, what are you doing? It's not like you're holding it by the scruff of the neck or putting a chain on it. It's the way you think about things that keeps you concentrated. And you'll learn how to think about things connecting with this full-body awareness, so that the thinking and the awareness are in tune. Then it's simply a matter of reminding yourself: Stay here; stay here.

When you're not staying here, then you have to remind yourself to move back to the breath, to do this or do that. There's going to be a lot of direction going on in the background. But as things begin to settle down, that directing voice can get simpler. The directions get simpler. They turn from thinking into simple perceptions: This breath. This breath. And they actually become part of the concentration.

So the way you think as you're coming into the meditation is an important part of the practice. You can't just say, "Well, I'll drop all my thinking and be right here." Sometimes you've got to think your way through whatever problems are getting in the way. And as I said earlier, don't regard the thinking as a waste of time, because it takes thinking to solve thinking. Some issues you can put aside for the time being. Maybe you can't cut all the way through them but you can disable them enough so that they're not going to get in the way. But with other issues, you have to think them through a certain amount before you can get them out of the way for the time being. This is a long-term project we're working on, because the mind has lots of unskillful ways of thinking, lots of unskillful ways of understanding itself. And learning how to get the mind into concentration gives you a long-term source of sustenance to keep you going as you begin to take all these problems apart.

Building Character

October 19, 2016

I had a student in Thailand who was always itching to get out into the forest, complaining that life in the monastery was placing too many restrictions on his meditation. And so finally he got out into the forest, he had his own little hut, his own mountain—nothing to do but meditate all day long. Yet for the first couple of months, his meditation was miserable, and there was nobody he could blame it on. He couldn't blame it on the schedule; he couldn't blame it on other people; he couldn't blame it on the location. All the convenient scapegoats were gone. So finally he took himself in hand and reminded himself, "Well, at the very least, I'm learning the perfection of endurance."

There are several lessons to be drawn from that. One is to remember that there are bound to be ups and downs in the meditation. You have to watch out for the tendency to want to be a jhana junky or an insight junky—in other words, to go for the hits and then to feel frustrated when you can't get the mind to settle down like before, to get the insights you had before, and you're not in the zone that meditators like to get into. In cases like that, you've got to learn how to deal with those ups and downs in a mature way instead of being like the typical junky who just gets frustrated and difficult to deal with when he can't indulge in his addiction, can't get the hit, can't get the pleasure he wants.

We're here to build character, not just to have the hits of insight or the hits of concentration. When you think of that phrase "building character," you immediately think of *Calvin and Hobbes,* the one where Calvin does an imitation of his father and says, "Calvin, build some character. Go do something you hate." Now, there are a lot of things that build character that we don't like, but the trick is learning how not to hate doing them, learning to actually like them. The thought that saved the monk in the forest was, "At least I'm developing something good out of this, developing some character." There was something to show for this, and he could actually come to enjoy it.

We had that phrase in the chant just now about right effort—learning how to generate desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop the skillful ones. In other words, you have to talk yourself into liking what you're doing and to see the practice as an opportunity to develop good qualities all around. There are good qualities to be developed by meditating, and other good qualities to be developed by working in the orchard, good qualities to be developed by cleaning up. The nice thing about being in a monastery and doing these things is that nobody is competing with you. No one is

making it a race to see who has better qualities. But you can make it a race with yourself.

Ajaan Fuang used to call this "looking for the grass at the corral door." He once took a group of his students up to meditate at the chedi, but somebody had left a huge mess there. So instead of meditating, they had to clean up the mess. One of the women complained, asking, "What kind of person would leave a mess like this?" And he said, "Don't criticize them. They gave us this opportunity to make some merit."

Then he told the story about the grass at the corral gate. As soon as you open the corral gate, all the cows go rushing out to look for the grass out in the meadow. There's grass right there at the post to the gate, but none of the cows eat that. There's something right nearby, something you could do, and there's a good benefit for your character coming out of that. So look around—there are opportunities to do good everywhere. And think of all the good qualities you're developing.

There's that phrase, "spiritual materialism," which makes people look down on the idea of getting something out of the practice. And the phrase *is* properly applied to the idea that you're going to get a hit every time you sit down and close your eyes—the rapture is going to come, the bliss is going to come, the insights are going to come pouring out of the mind. And then you sit there, and of course it doesn't happen, and you get frustrated. That kind of materialism actually keeps you immature.

But there's another kind of materialism, a good kind, regarding the good qualities of the mind you can develop. There's the list of the perfections—generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance—all those good Capricorn virtues; truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. As Ajaan Fuang liked to say, when the Buddha was born in all his many lifetimes up until he became a Buddha, he was born for the sake of mastering these perfections.

The list of good spiritual materialism in the suttas is the list of the noble treasures: conviction, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, virtue, learning, generosity, and discernment. These are treasures that, as you build them into your mind, are there for a good long time. No one else can take them away. They stick with you even after death.

Trying to amass these things is not bad or immature. It's actually good, because as you're amassing them, you're not taking anything away from anyone else. You're spreading the good benefits around. This is a kind of greed, you might call it, that actually has no bad consequences. So when things are difficult, look around.

I knew of another monk—I didn't know him personally but I read an article he had written one time, about how when he had gone to Asia, he tended to look down on the monks and nuns who puttered around the monastery. He was going to do nothing but meditate. And he found that, of course, his meditation got pretty dry very quickly. There's something uplifting about just doing a little something good here and there: nothing that anyone has forced you to do, something you voluntarily decide to do—to

clean up a little bit, or to straighten things out a little bit, or whatever. And the monk noticed that the people who were doing this actually had the juice to keep their meditation going.

All of this relates to a quality that Ajaan Maha Boowa defined as singleness of mind —*ekaggata.* In his definition of the term, it's not that the mind is one-pointed. It's that the mind has a solid stability that can weather the ups and downs. Whether they're ups and downs in outside conditions or ups and downs in your meditation—whatever the ups and downs, you want to have the mind on an even keel so that you can take them in stride. That way, when the hits come, you're not overwhelmed by them; and when they don't come, you don't start behaving like a cocaine addict who's desperate for the next hit.

If you're a meditation junkie, you get surrounded by a sea of annoyance—everything all around you is bad. Everything is wrong. And there's a certain charge that comes with that—that your anger is justified, that these things really are unfair, they're really not right. And you might be right, but to get angry over them is wrong. Still, there's a charge that comes with that. On the one hand, it lets you off the hook—the meditation isn't going well but it's not because of you, it's because of these horrible conditions outside. On the other hand, there's the physical charge that comes when you get angry—the adrenaline comes pouring out and there's a surge of energy. You feed on that—but it's really miserable food. It's aggravating food.

What you want to feed on is the sense that here's an opportunity to straighten things out a little bit, clean things up a little bit. Look for the opportunities to do good. They're there. There's a sense of well-being that comes with being generous, and sometimes what your meditation needs is a little bit of that juice—the juice that comes from a generous mind.

So this is the kind of character we're trying to build until eventually it's like the character of the Buddha, who commented that in the course of his quest for awakening, he never let pain overcome his mind, he never let pleasure overcome his mind. He was able to use pain and use pleasure as he kept developing all of his perfections, as he kept building his character.

And when you have that quality of character, you find that it's even more solid than your concentration. Concentration gives a solidity of one sort. But the solidity of a well-built character can carry you through even when the concentration gets weak, or the concentration has its ups and downs, or the insights don't come. It allows you to develop discernment in other ways.

We all think that insight means seeing things in terms of inconstancy, stress, not-self; seeing the structure of nature or of reality and how empty it all is. And those are the important insights. But there are other insights in realizing: How do you keep yourself going? How do you maintain your stamina in the midst of the ups and downs?

That requires insight, too. And it gives you really good insights into the workings of your mind. You come across defilements you wouldn't have seen otherwise, and you learn how to outsmart them.

So insights are everywhere. And you're most likely to uncover them as you're trying to develop good qualities of mind, as you're trying to build your character, as you learn to do things you don't like to do but you learn to want to do them. Learn to look for them, and you'll see them.

The Gift of Spiritual Materialism

September 1, 2016

The Buddha called the qualities that we develop on the path *ariya-dhana:* noble treasures or noble wealth. He was not at all shy about using financial analogies to explain the path, to explain the goal. The arahant, he said, is someone who's totally without debt, feeds off the alms of the country without debt.

And the forest ajaans carry out this image as well. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about becoming an inner millionaire, and he calls the state of mind that you gain with awakening a "Dhamma treasure."

So you hear nothing in the forest tradition about trying to get away from "spiritual materialism," away from trying to acquire something in the practice. The ajaans, following the Buddha, are quite frank about the fact that you *want* to acquire good qualities and that they are really valuable, really worth aspiring to.

Ajaan Lee has a nice way of putting it. He says when you let go, you want to let go like a wealthy person and not like a pauper. The pauper doesn't have a Mercedes and he brags, "I'll just let go of any desire to have a Mercedes." That's nothing compared to a wealthy person who has worked to get the Mercedes and is willing to let it go. Because there's a real Mercedes there, other people can benefit from it.

In other words, the good qualities you develop in the mind are not only for your own good. If you go down the list of noble treasures, you'll see that they spread their benefits around.

To begin with, there's conviction, virtue, shame, and compunction. These four form a set. You believe in the power of action: that the Buddha really was awakened, and that his awakening depended on his own actions. You also are convinced that the qualities he developed to gain that awakening are qualities we all have in potential form. It's through our actions that we can foster them and bring them to that same level of skill, the same state of maturity.

Virtue grows out of that conviction. In your quest to be skillful, you don't want to harm anyone in any way. So you hold by the precepts—the five, the eight, the 227 precepts—as a way of making sure that you don't harm yourself, you don't harm others.

Shame and compunction are the emotions that keep you in line with those precepts. You would be ashamed to break the precepts, because you realize that harmful actions are beneath you. You're a better person than that.

As for compunction, it's the opposite of apathy. Apathy says, "I don't care what happens down the line. I'm just going to go for what I want right now." Compunction

cares. It says, "What happens down the line is important, so I've got to be careful about what I do right now. I can't just go by my immediate wants." These two qualities, shame and compunction, are a form of wealth because they protect you in so many ways from doing things that you would later regret.

Years back, I heard a radio interview with an old guy who'd been a soldier in Vietnam. Apparently, he'd killed a young girl during the war for no reason at all. And every night, the memory of the young girl kept haunting him. As he said to the interviewer, "If I had a million dollars to go back and undo that, I would gladly spend that much money." But of course, no amount of money can undo your past deeds. Which means that if you have the shame and compunction not to do those things to begin with, it's worth more than a million dollars.

As for the remaining three noble treasures, they're learning, generosity, and discernment.

Learning is your knowledge of the Dhamma. Here, too, you're not the only one who benefits when you know the Dhamma. You can share it with others. At the very least, if you act in line with the Dhamma you've learned, other people will benefit.

Generosity is the way in which it's most obvious that other people benefit from your good qualities, because you're giving of material things, your time, your knowledge, your energy, your forgiveness. You're not just taking from the world; you're giving good things back.

Finally, there's discernment, the treasure that protects all the others. What this means is this: As the result of the good kamma of generosity, the good kamma of virtue, you'll be reborn in really nice places and have a really good situation in life. But if you don't have discernment, you can abuse that goodness. Discernment is what helps you see that even the goodness that comes from virtue and generosity is not enough. You need more. And as you develop that discernment, you're a good example to others. Your actions don't weigh on them, because you're able to see through your own greed, aversion, and delusion, and to *cut* them through. That way, other people aren't subjected to those things.

Now, there is a point on the path where you take all these noble treasures you've developed and you give them up. Even discernment is something that, at the very end of the path, has to be abandoned as well. As with all the factors of the path, discernment does its work and then you put it down. But that doesn't mean those things are no longer there. It's just that you don't have to hold onto them anymore. And they're there for you to share.

Think of the Buddha: all the good qualities he developed and then shared with everyone. For 45 years, he walked all over Northern India, sharing his wealth.

So don't be ashamed of hoping that you'll gain something from the practice. There's nothing wrong with spiritual materialism if you use the materials wisely. There are so

many practice traditions out there that say that you shouldn't have any goals at all, you shouldn't aim at anything, just *be* in the present moment. That's letting go like a pauper. You have nothing and so you let it go. And it's still nothing. It doesn't take much to let go of nothing. But if you've got a really good treasure, it's quite an accomplishment to use it properly and then let it go.

So we're developing all these good things so that they'll do their work on our minds and will also leave something extra to give to the world. While you're meditating tonight, remember that it's for you *and* for others. What are you giving? What do you have to give? Put your mind in really good shape, so that the shape of your mind, the state of your mind, is something that you'd be happy to present to other people as a gift.

If you're sitting here wondering about what you're going to do tomorrow, wondering about what happened today, thinking about things that are not related to the breath, that's not much of a gift. Try to develop the state of mind that you'd be happy and proud to present to somebody else.

There are a couple of stories related to this point in the tales of the ajaans. A young monk comes to see the ajaan and talks about how he's been obsessed with sex and can't stop thinking about it. In one case, the ajaan was Ajaan Chah; in another, it was Ajaan Thate. And in both cases their cure for that was to say, "Okay, tomorrow you can get up on the sermon seat and tell everybody in the community in great detail what your fantasies are." And it both cases it worked. The monks stopped thinking about those things.

So think of your state of mind tonight as a potential gift. Put it in good shape, something that you would be happy to give to others. After all, in a way, we're giving our minds to everybody all the time. The state of our mind comes out in our actions, in our words, so people are seeing and receiving your state of mind all the time.

So—without showing off—create inside yourself a really good state of mind. It'll show itself both inside and out, and people will find that it's a gift that they're happy to receive. The best gift you can give, of course, is the gift of a noble treasure. So make your mind into a noble treasure, and it'll spread its noble benefits all around.

Patience & Tenacity

May 23, 2017

We come to meditation with ideas about how wonderful it's going to be: The mind settles down with the breath, waves of pleasure and rapture come over the body, everything is at peace. That's the idea. But before that idea becomes a reality, you'll discover that there's going to be pain and there are going to be distractions. And to get through the pain and distractions requires both patience and ingenuity.

The word for patience in Pali, *khanti,* also means endurance and tenacity. In other words, you're not just sitting here passively on the receiving end of the pain or the distractions. You're tenacious in trying to figure them out—because you can't really get past them until you figure them out. You can't just blot them out. Concentration does require some insight. We hear all the time that you need concentration first before you can gain insight. But a lot of practical experience, backed up by what the Canon says, indicates that there has to be some insight to do the concentration. You have to understand the mind to some extent before you can get it to settle down. That means you've got to figure things out. To figure things out, you have to watch them and ask the right questions.

To help with the watching, the Buddha—when he gave instructions to Rahula, his son, before teaching him breath meditation—taught him, "Make your mind like earth." People throw disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn't get disgusted. People pour perfume on the earth, the earth isn't excited. It just stays right there, impassive. But the Buddha's not telling you to make your mind like a clod of dirt. He's telling you that if you want to understand things, you first have to be able to sit through them patiently to see them clearly.

Then, when he goes on to describe the stages of breath meditation, it's very proactive. You breathe in certain ways, you breathe with certain intentions in mind. You want to shape your experience, but you want to shape your experience based on some understanding. So you experiment. This is where the ingenuity comes in. And this is also what keeps you going. In other words, you don't let yourself be solely on the receiving end. This applies both to pain and to distractions. When pain comes, you ask questions about it.

One of the first questions is, "Is there pain everywhere in the body?" Well, no, if there were pain everywhere in the body, you'd die. There have to be some areas of the body that are comfortable. Focus on those first. The secret to patience is that you focus on your strengths. In the midst of things that are pretty miserable, you can at least focus on the places where there's some amount of pleasure, the places where you're relatively

safe and that can act as a basis for your strengths. Focus on those. As you focus there, the whole idea of being patient doesn't seem so onerous, doesn't seem so heavy. That way, you can look at your mind's tendency to make more out of the pain and more out of the distractions than you have to.

Ajaan Lee has an image where you're plowing a field with a water buffalo and you tie a big bag to the water buffalo's leg. All the dirt that falls off the plow, you put in the bag. Of course, you're going to get weighed down. But that's a good symbol for how the mind often reacts to pain. You keep gathering it up and carrying it with you. For instance, you're sitting here for a whole hour and you're thinking, "All this long time I've been sitting here with pain and I don't have anything to show for it." Drop what's in the past entirely. The pain in the past is no longer there, so why think about it? Don't think about how long you've been sitting with the pain. You're just here right now as the dirt falls off the plow.

The same goes for the future: Don't think how much longer it's going to last. Otherwise, you're weighing yourself down with the past pain and anticipating the future pain, and that puts too much pressure on the present moment. You've got the physical pain here already, and then the memory and the anticipation of the pain get piled on top. Things get unbearable. So keep reminding yourself that the past is gone, gone, gone. Every moment, as soon as it appears, is gone. In fact, think of the pain as going away from you rather than coming at you to begin with.

The lesson here, of course, is that your perception of the pain has a lot to do with how much it's going to weigh down the mind. So change your perception.

If you notice that there are periods when the pain seems to be bothering the mind more than at other times, okay, what happened? What perception went through your mind that made the pain more intense or more burdensome for the mind? Can you drop that perception and replace it with a different one?

As you get more proactive with the pain here, you don't feel like you're on the receiving end so much. And as you get more proactive, the pain begins to recede. It may still be there, but it doesn't have the same presence. It doesn't have the same power as when you simply let it come at you.

Dealing with distraction is something else. A large part of the problem, of course, is a lapse of mindfulness. But there's the added problem, if you've just arrived here, that the momentum from the past few days outside of the monastery is going to carry over into your first couple of days here. So realize that it will take a while for things to settle down, for that excess energy to wear itself out. Then you can ask yourself, what are you going to do in the meantime? Find some little spot in the body that's comfortable or find some topic you like thinking about. As long as the mind has energy to think, think about something that's not just the breath—like the contemplation we did of the body parts just now.

A lot of people don't like that contemplation, but it can actually be a very calming process, realizing that everybody's bodies are just like this. All the issues you may have about your body: Whether you like your body or don't like your body, they get cut through when you realize that when you open up your body and everybody else's body, there is nothing you really want to look at in either case. There's no reason to feel jealous about other people's bodies or to be worried about your appearance. This allows you to focus instead on what you can *do* with your body, what you can do with your mind, in the sense of creating good kamma by doing skillful things

So you can think about the fact that the body is just these different pieces. You might think about the skeleton. Visualize the skeleton to yourself and just go through each bone, one by one by one. Start with the tips of the fingers, relax your hands around the bones that you're thinking about, then work your way up to the wrists, the forearms, the elbows, the upper arms, the shoulders. Then start down at the feet: the tips of the toes, the bones in the toes, the bones in the feet, up to the ankles, the shins, the knees, the thigh bones, the pelvis, up the spine, vertebra by vertebra, up to the skull. As long as you've got the energy to think, think about these. Visualize the bones and also have a sense of relaxing around whichever bone you're visualizing. Here again, you're not just on the receiving end. You try various things. You probe, you question, you take the initiative. This is the tenacious side of the practice You keep at it.

Even though part of the mind may be in a lot of turmoil, you can find a little corner that's not, that can actually think about what you want to think about or be still with the breath if you finally want to be still with the breath. Think of your mind as being like a large room. There maybe some people off in the corner chatting away, but you don't have to get involved in their chatter. And the fact that they're chatting doesn't wipe out the experience of the breath. It doesn't have to, let's put it that way. If you let it, it will. But it doesn't have to. The breath is still there. You're still breathing.

So learn how to separate yourself from the chatter in the mind. And don't worry about how long it's going to last. As long as you're not getting involved, you've covered the important point. Think of the chatter as past kamma, and your determination not to get involved as your present kamma. Focus on your present kamma. Let the past go.

This way, you find it a lot easier to stick with the meditation. The fact that you can sit here for long periods of time doesn't seem to be such a chore because you're not carrying the past around. You're not carrying your anticipation for the future around. Whatever happens, you note it and it's gone. You note it and it's gone. Now you can sit here with a sense of lightness.

So this is how you become patient. This is how you become enduring. Not by talking to yourself about how long a slog it's going to be, but by reminding yourself that the stuff weighing you down in the past is gone. The stuff weighing you down in the future is nowhere to be found. It's not here yet. All you've got is the present moment. And you stick with that, stick with that, stick with that. And by using mindfulness to

stitch together these little moments of the present, stitching them and then letting the past pains go, stitching them and letting the past pains go, connecting your mindfulness, letting everything else go: That's how you get into concentration. By keeping your object in mind and letting go of everything else. At first you have to be focused on doing this in spite of all the other noise and all the other stuff that's going on, but as you are really single-minded in pursuing this, things really do begin to quiet down.

If there's pain in the body, you have a place to focus that's not in pain. As for the thoughts, you're no longer feeding them. The thoughts keep coming back again and again and again like stray cats and dogs because you feed them i.e., you pay attention to them. Even getting upset about them when you're trying to chase them away, they've got you. You've given them food. So let them be there, but you don't have to be with them.

If you notice any tension in the body that's related to the thoughts, let it disperse. Breathe right through it. Any tension building up around your pain, breathe right through it. Notice that often the spot where the pain is felt is not where the cause of the pain is in terms of energy flow in the body. So do a little exploring. I found, for instance, that headaches often come from tension down in the lower back. Pain in the knees can also be aggravated by tightness in the neck.

So look around, use your ingenuity. And try to have that attitude that the mind is like earth. It can stick with these things but not get involved with them. It can be present to them but not involved. And when you have that kind of solidity, then you really can begin to see cause and effect clearly in the mind as you try different approaches and you see what works and what doesn't work. When the mind lacks that solidity and you want things to be a certain way, then when they're not a certain way, you get upset. You don't really see what you're doing. It's like scientific equipment: If you put it on a wobbly table, then no matter what it's measuring, you can't really trust the measurements because the wobble is in there as well. But if the equipment is on a table that's solid, and the table is in a building that's solid, then you can get precise measurements.

So be solid in your determination that whatever comes up, you're not going to get upset. You're not going to get excited. You're not going to wobble. You're just going to watch and learn. Meditation, even if it's not yet as quiet as you'd like it to be or as blissful as you'd like it to be, is still a meditation where you can learn. And learning is heading in the right direction.

The Heart to Keep Going

October 26, 2016

When the texts give maps for the practice—this can be in the Canon or in the teachings of the ajaans—they make it sound very smooth: step by step, easy, smooth, one-directional practice, always and ever up. But you look at your own practice, and it goes up and comes down, up and down. It's easy to get frustrated by that, but it's not wise.

The wise attitude is to take things one step at a time and to remember that the mind is a complex phenomenon. Ajaan Lee gives an analogy. He says that some people's minds are like banana trees—they have only one leaf to create, so they grow very fast. Large trees, though, have to create lots of branches and lots of leaves, so they grow slowly. So don't compare yourself with the texts; don't compare yourself with other people whose practice is like a banana tree and seems to be going faster than yours. After all, your practice is your practice. Their practice is theirs. Maybe yours is going to be a big tree. And whatever kind of tree it is, it's essential for your well-being.

Also remember that we're not here just for the pleasure and the rapture that can come with concentration. We're here for all the other skills that go into training the mind. Each time you find the mind wandering off and you bring it back, that's strengthening a very essential skill—the skill to get your mind off a bad topic and bring it back to a good one. Even though this may happen many times, the fact that you're able to come back many times is a good sign.

At the same time, you're also developing the observer inside, what in some circles they call *meta-consciousness*—the ability to watch your own mind, to observe your own mind from the outside, and not get sucked into all of its stories and moods. The moods and the stories are one thing, but your awareness is something else. Each time you pull out of a thought world, you strengthen that sense of the separate observer. And that's a very useful skill as you go through the day.

Sometimes it's difficult to take the sense of ease you get in meditation and carry it off the cushion back into daily life. Sometimes it happens easily, but sometimes it's hard. But what you *can* take, all the time, are the skills—the skills of not just riding with your mind in whichever direction it wants to run. And even though it may still run for a while, the fact that you're pulling back a little bit is part of right effort.

Right effort is an essential factor in the path—generating desire, upholding your intent, maintaining your persistence to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen. Notice that the unskillful qualities are there, and you're going to do battle with them—

you're going to figure out one way or another to get yourself motivated to stick with the effort.

This is one area where desire is actually a helpful thing. The desire to want to do this well is not a bad thing at all. I've been reading a couple of explanations of right resolve, and strangely enough, they interpret the resolve for renunciation to mean the resolve to renounce *all* desires. But that's not what the Buddha said. "Renunciation" here means renouncing sensuality—the mind's tendency to waste its time planning tomorrow's sensual pleasures, or your sensual pleasures for the next hour, whatever. You can go over those fantasies for hours at a time—thinking about how you would like this, how you'd like it like that, or no, maybe change this little bit here, and so on. You can keep going around and around and around this way, and the mind really feeds on this kind of thinking. That's what we're trying to renounce. If you're aiming to get the mind with the breath, that counts as your intent to get away from sensuality—your desire to get away from sensuality—and you should try to strengthen that.

Then you try to figure out ways to remind yourself of why you're doing this, to keep yourself motivated. You can use the principle of heedfulness, realizing that if you can't get some control over the mind now when you're in relatively good health, relatively sane, what are you going to do, say, if pain gets really, really bad and you start getting delirious? The mind would just jump for anything that seems pleasant. And you know what happens to people who jump at anything—they end up jumping into places they later regret.

You want to have some control over the mind so that it doesn't go shooting off into that area. You have to remind yourself of why you don't want to get involved in the waste of time that's sensual thinking. Part of your approach is to keep trying to develop a sense of the pleasure that can come from form, the way you feel the body from within. Whether or not the pleasure comes automatically, the fact that you're aiming in this direction—trying to think of the breath, trying to think of the body right here, right now, as you feel it from within—that's all right effort.

As for the complaining voices that may come up, saying that it's a waste of time to meditate, that you're not getting anywhere: You have to learn how to slough those off, too. Don't listen to them. Don't identify with them. Always try to identify with the effort.

Ajaan Mun, toward the end of his life, gave a Dhamma talk about going into battle with the defilements. Your determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again: That's the soldier in his analogy. The soldier has the weapon of discernment, and is fed by concentration. But what keeps the soldier going is that firm determination—a firm desire not to be fooled by greed, aversion, or delusion ever again. That's your motivation. That's *you* right now. And the more you can make that "you" identify with all the thoughts that cluster around that identity, the easier it'll be to let go of the other identities that would pull you away and say, "Well, I just want to

meditate a little bit so I can have some nice relaxation. I'd like to have a nice smooth, quiet evening in the mind right now; I don't want to have to work or think or anything."

Actually, though, you're here in battle. You've got to do battle with your greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes they get really quiet, and it doesn't seem like much of a battle. Other times, they can be really hard to fend off. So you want to work on the skills. You don't want a nice, pleasant, easy meditation, and just satisfy yourself with that. You have to ask yourself, "What skills am I learning? Someday greed or anger will come on strong, and now I have the chance to develop the skills I'll need then so that I won't get taken in."

Now, even though we are in battle, we do want a sense of ease. That's why the Buddha makes concentration—with a sense of ease and refreshment—an important element of the path. But on the days when the ease and refreshment aren't coming quickly, you have to learn how to feed yourself with something else, and to stick with that determination not to come back—or, at the very least, the determination not to be fooled by your greed, aversion, and delusion again. Otherwise, they'll find some smooth-talking ways to fool you. That's what happens when you give in to the voice that says, "This is a waste of time. The meditation isn't going anywhere. I'd be better off doing something else." If you give in to that, they laugh at you, the defilements—they've tricked you again.

So you need an element of pride in here, but it's skillful pride: the pride of mastering a skill—a harmless skill, a useful skill, a skill that can take you someplace you've never been before.

Now, this skill may take time, but don't think about how far away the goal is or how long it's going to take. If you don't aim at the goal, life in samsara is going to take even longer, with a lot more suffering along the way. Each step you take—as long as it's in the right direction—is a step well made. Learn how to encourage yourself in that way. That, too, is an important skill to take out of the meditation and into your daily life. There will be times when you'll come up against unexpected difficulties—things in the world are going in all directions right now; who knows where they're going to go?—so you want the skills of the mind that say, "Okay, I can handle whatever comes up. I'm not going to be overwhelmed by anything." That's what you learn in the meditation.

You realize that one of the big things that weaken you is a mind that's out of control, where you just give in to whatever its mood is. When you start siding with moods that way, who knows where they're going to take you? But even though the mood is there—frustrated, upset, whatever—part of the mind is separate. It can watch and not run along with the mood. *That's* what you need. Without that, you're lost.

This separate observer that we're working on here, that can pull out of a thought at least for a little bit, is something you want to develop again and again and again. That's the basis for gaining the control you're going to need so that your mind doesn't take you

places you don't want to go.

So remember that even though the pleasure and refreshment are an important part of the meditation, they're not the whole of the meditation. The skills you learn to keep your mind under control: Those are the essential parts. Even if they don't come quickly or easily, the fact that they're coming and that you're moving in that direction: That's something that should give you heart—the heart to keep going.

Success Through Maturity

November 2, 2017

There are four qualities that the Buddha said can bring about success in the practice of meditation, and in particular, success in concentration: desire; persistence, or effort; intentness; and using your powers of judgment wisely. Of those four, three are omitted in modern instructions in meditation. In fact, the three are said to be *bad* in modern meditation. Desire is bad. Efforting is bad. Judging is bad. Even the idea of success is bad. And as for intentness, paying attention carefully to the present moment, the meaning has changed from the way the Buddha used it.

A lot of this comes from the fact that most people are taught meditation on retreat in a pressure-cooker atmosphere. The retreatants could have gone on vacations on beaches or out in the wilds, but instead, they're spending their time in a meditation hall. So they want something to show for it. To avoid explosions in this pressure cooker, teachers will say, "Have no goals. There is no such thing as success. There's simply the present moment," which may get people through the weekend or the week or whatever, but doesn't necessarily bring the best results in meditation long term.

There was a time when the Buddha once told the monks to practice breath meditation. And one monk said, "Yes, I practice breath meditation." The Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk replied, "I put aside hopes and expectations for the future, thoughts about the past, and—equanimous in the present moment—I breathe in, I breathe out." Which sounds like a lot of the meditation instructions you may get at a meditation retreat. But the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it doesn't give the best results."

Then he set forth his sixteen steps, which are very proactive. You make up your mind that you're going to breathe in certain ways: Breathe aware of the whole body. Breathe calming the breath. Breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. Breathe in a way that steadies the mind, gladdens the mind, or releases the mind, depending on what the mind needs. What all of these steps have in common is that they're very proactive. They're aimed at giving rise to certain states, getting the mind into right concentration. There is a purpose to all this. The Buddha's instructions on mindfulness, if they're done right, go right there, to right concentration.

One reason for why those bases for success got pushed aside and developed a bad reputation is that people are pretty immature about how they approach their desires, their efforts, and the way they use their powers of judgment. You can't teach maturity in a week, so the teachers try to sidestep the issue entirely. But for a long-term practice, we need to develop maturity, especially in relating to our goals, realizing that we've set

ourselves a large task here.

To put an end to suffering requires really understanding the mind, training the mind, bringing the mind into states of concentration so that it can see itself clearly. That's a big task. As with any big task, you need to be mature in how you approach it if you want to succeed. The first requirement is realizing that it has to be taken in small steps, but you have to be persistent in taking the steps.

This means that you have to have an immediate focus on the present at the same time you take a long view. The immediate focus is for making sure you give full attention to what you're doing. The long view is for learning how to read the results of your actions without getting upset over setbacks. Accept the fact that there will be progress and regress, back and forth, as you get to know the territory of the mind. You have to learn how to bear the task with patience and equanimity, which doesn't mean that you just simply let things slide. It means that you put in the work, you make the effort right here, right now, but you have to be realistic about the goals you're setting for yourself, realizing that the big goals won't yet appear right here, right now. Set interim goals for yourself so that the task isn't too overwhelming, so that you can keep your desire nourished and alive. And, beginning with desire, learn how to be mature in all four of these bases for success.

Mature desire realizes that effects come about through causes. If you simply sit there wishing for the effects without doing the causes, nothing's going to happen. That kind of desire gets in the way. If you've ever mastered a manual skill—a sport, carpentry, cooking, anything that requires time and energy to get really good at it—you've probably learned how to get your desire under control, get it focused on doing the steps right. When the steps are done right, the results will come.

In this case, directed thought and evaluation are the causes. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath so that it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you ask yourself, "What can I do to make it comfortable?" When it finally is comfortable, "What do I do to maintain it to keep that sense of comfort going all the way through each in-breath, each out-breath?" As the needs of the body change, how do you change the breath to maintain that comfort? And then how do you let it spread throughout the body, to get the most use out of it?

In the Buddha's analogy, it's like mixing water with flour to make dough. You want the water to moisten the entire ball of dough with nothing left over. So you knead the sense of pleasure through the body in the same way you'd knead the water through the dough. How do you do that? You figure that out, using the help you can get from people like Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang, who've worked on this problem and offered advice. That's the way you focus your desire: on desiring to master the skills needed to succeed. And then you try to make your desire single-minded here with the breath. Anything else that comes up right now is of no interest, no importance. That's the kind of attitude you want to develop. You want to make your desire focused, and focused properly on the

steps that act as the causes.

As for effort, realize that there are many kinds of right effort. There's the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from happening, the effort to get rid of them when they're there, the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, and the effort to maintain and develop them when they're there—all of which are different kinds of efforts. You can ask yourself which kind is appropriate right now. As for the amount of effort, it depends partly on the task at hand and partly on your strength right now: what level of energy you have, reminding yourself that the effort here is not muscular effort. It's an effort in the mind: the effort to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen, the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising again, the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, and the effort to maintain them so that they grow.

These are efforts of the mind that have to be continued even as things start getting comfortable. And this is how effort becomes mature. It's very easy for the mind to start wallowing in a comfortable thought or a pleasant thought that has nothing to do with the meditation, nothing to do with thoughts of "skillful" or "unskillful." It's also easy to wallow in the comfort caused by the meditation. But then you forget the causes, and things fall apart. You have to work at maintaining your focus. Remind yourself that you don't know how many more breaths you have. Each time your heart beats, it's one less beat between you and death. So you want to use those heartbeats well. Focus each on nurturing a skillful cause.

As for intentness, you're intent, you pay careful attention to the present moment, but not in a general way. To be maturely intent, you pay attention specifically to what you're doing and the results of your actions. The more sensitive you are to what you're doing, the more you see where your unskillful thoughts are hiding out or where you can improve things.

As for using your powers of judgment, it's very important that you not judge yourself as a meditator. To be mature, you judge your actions. Judge your meditation as a carpenter would judge a work in progress: impersonally, with the purpose of making it better. When things are not going well, learn how to be critical in a useful way, i.e., try to use your ingenuity for the purpose of doing things more skillfully. Figure out, "What's going wrong and what can be done to change what I'm doing?"

This is the way the Buddha approached his quest for awakening. He made some pretty big mistakes: six years of self-torment. But at the end of those six years, he didn't get down on himself. He simply said, "Well, that's obviously not the way. There must be another way." He depersonalized it. It was simply a matter of actions and results. And then he used his ingenuity: "Is there another way?" He thought of the time when he was young and had spontaneously gotten into the first jhana. He asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?"—because those six years of torment were driven by a fear of pleasure. Now he realized that the pleasure of jhana was not a sensual pleasure. It was a skillful pleasure. It caused no harm. It didn't fog the mind. It deserved no blame. So he

gave it a try.

So learn how to take criticism well, both external criticism and internal criticism. The criticism, to be helpful, is focused on actions and how you can change your actions to yield the results you desire. All these four qualities, when they're mature, center on this: realizing that everything has to be understood as causes and effects, so you desire to do the causes well. You put the effort into doing the causes well. You pay careful attention to what you're doing, sensitive to the results. Then you try to figure out how to make those results better.

Those last two qualities are well-summarized by Ajaan Fuang. I've said many times that the two instructions he gave most often when teaching meditation were, "Be observant," and, "Use your ingenuity." Being observant is a matter of intentness. Using your ingenuity is the best way of using your powers of judgment to get yourself past an impasse.

This is how these four qualities actually do lead to success in the meditation. You attain the goal that the Buddha talked about. In the very beginning, you get the mind into a state of right concentration. From there, you develop insight, again, by looking at what you're doing and being sensitive to your actions and their results. But these bases of success help not only with concentration, but also with the development of discernment, because they force you to be more sensitive to what's possible. And they spur you on to want to keep succeeding on higher and higher levels.

As the Buddha said, the total ending of suffering is possible. Listen to that: Total. Ending. It's not simply a matter of being okay with whatever comes up and passes away. It's not a matter of lowering your expectations. You raise your expectations as to what a human being can do, as to what *you* as a human being can do. As they say of marksmanship, you don't hit any higher than you aim. So aim high. But learn how to live with a high aim in a mature way, so that your immaturity doesn't get in the way of attaining the goal we all want.

Look after Your Mind with Ease

December 14, 2016

"May you look after yourself with ease."

That's the message of the chant we recite every night, every morning. It's an expression of goodwill.

"Looking after yourself" refers both to your physical and to your mental well-being. Physically, may you be healthy. Or if your health is bad, may it be the sort of problem that you know how to take care of, and it doesn't require too much effort.

But more importantly, you want to learn how to look after your mind with ease, so that the issues in the mind are not a constant struggle, and you don't need to be depending on other people to solve your problems for you. You want to be able to see a problem come up in the mind and also to have another part of the mind that can look at it and see what's wrong, recognize what's wrong, and come up with an antidote.

That requires training. And a lot of the training, a lot of looking after your mind, basically means knowing how to talk to yourself.

Like right now, we're sitting here, getting the mind to settle down. This requires that you do a certain amount of talking to yourself. You want to do it in a way that's skillful, that actually does bring the mind to a quieter state where you can put all that chatter aside.

In the beginning stages, talking to the mind is necessary. Don't think of it as an unfortunate obstacle as you're trying to get the mind concentrated. It's an essential part of the concentration that you learn how to rope in the mind's thoughts and gather them in closer and closer and closer to a sense of stillness.

So, right now, talk to yourself about the breath. How is the breath going? Is it comfortable? Where do you feel the breath right now? When you breathe in, does it feel like you're fully nourishing your torso all the way down? Is it nourishing the nerves? Is it nourishing your eyes, your ears?

Think of the breath as the flow of energy in the body, and ask yourself where it would feel good for that flow to go. Then, once it feels good, ask yourself how you can make it spread so that it suffuses the entire body with a sense of well-being. That's a skillful way of talking to yourself.

Then you begin to notice at what point the breath is as good as it's going to be, and it's good enough to settle down with. That's when you put the inner chatter aside and just plow into the breath. But to know when that point is: That requires that you talk to yourself, too.

So these are some skillful ways of talking to yourself to get the mind to settle down.

There are other times when you're not in formal meditation, and you need to know how to talk to the mind, especially when it's getting obsessed with something that's really not good for it. Here your internal chatter can be informed by some reflections on what the Buddha has to say about right speech.

To begin with, right speech grows out of right resolve, as we chanted just now: resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, and resolve for harmlessness.

In terms of renunciation: If you find that the mind is getting obsessed with sensual pleasures or sensual objects, ideas, desires, how do you talk to it so that it can begin to admit that you don't really need those things? Otherwise, the mind will keep saying, "I need this pleasure, I need that pleasure. I can't stand not having it."

You have to learn how to counter that justification because, after all, you don't really need these things. You can survive perfectly well without them. There are other pleasures that the mind can feed on—like the pleasure of good breathing—that will nourish it in a much more substantial way.

As for non-ill will: We don't usually think that we have ill will for ourselves, but if you find yourself thinking about giving up on the practice, you have to ask yourself, "Do you really love yourself?" After all, you started this practice because you realized that you were causing yourself unnecessary suffering. And this is the path out of that suffering. Why would you want to give it up? If you really loved yourself, you wouldn't think of abandoning it.

The same with the resolve on harmlessness: We don't like to think that we would harm ourselves, but we keep doing things that are really stupid because we don't really care about the consequences. We say, "Let the consequences take care of themselves. I'm going to do what I feel like doing right now." That's apathy, and it's a way of harming yourself.

You've got to think down the line. As the Buddha says, "Ask yourself: What would be for my long-term welfare and happiness." When you find yourself tempted to give in to a desire to do or say or think something that you know would be bad for you, ask yourself, "How will I feel tomorrow from having done this?" Remember the times you were able to say No to yourself, and how much better it felt the next day.

So these are some of the lessons from right resolve, which are also lessons from right effort: knowing how you motivate yourself to keep on going.

The Buddha has a list of what he calls three "governing principles," which are different ways of motivating yourself to stick with the practice.

First there's the Dhamma as a governing principle. You reflect on what a good Dhamma this is, how it's hard to find an honest Dhamma like this, and why it'd be a shame to wander away from it. In this case, you use a sense of inspiration to keep you going. This governing principle is based on a sense of appreciation, a sense of gratitude

to the Buddha for having taught this excellent Dhamma.

Then there's the self as a governing principle. This connects with that question I just mentioned: "Do you really love yourself?" You see that you're suffering, and a lot of the suffering comes from you. In fact, *all* the unnecessary suffering comes from your actions. So when are you going to stop? If you put it off to some other lifetime or sometime later in this lifetime, it won't get easier with time. If you're going to love yourself, talk to yourself in ways that keep you going right now. This governing principle is based on goodwill.

The third governing principle is based on a sense of shame. The Buddha calls it "the world as a governing principle." You remind yourself that there are people in the world who can read other people's minds. Suppose they were to read your mind right now: What would they think? Wouldn't you be ashamed if they saw the unskillful thoughts that you're feeding on right now?

These are some lessons from right resolve and right effort to keep in mind as you're chatting to yourself about the practice, about where you're going in the practice, and how you want to stick with it.

Then, of course, there are the lessons from right speech itself. As the Buddha said, the things he would talk about would have to be: 1) true, 2) beneficial, and 3) timely. You can apply the same standards to your thoughts. If something comes up in the mind, ask yourself: "Is this really true?" Some parts of the mind might say, "Yes, it's really true," but you have to question them: To what extent is the opposite true? What happens if you think in that opposite way? Which leads in a better direction?

This is a good brake on the type of obsessive thinking that grabs on to one little detail, one little idea, and just runs with it, without any concern about where it's going to go. You have to be able to check yourself: To what extent is this thought out of balance, even if it is true? And is it really true? The mind can convince itself of the truth of all kinds of stupid things. You've got to learn how to step back and question them.

I saw a case in my own family years back when my father was going through a severe depression. I came back from Thailand to talk to him, and I found that the best approach was, one, not to mention the B word as we were talking and, two, to let him talk. After a couple days of talking, he sat bolt upright in bed, and said something that indicated what the real problem was—something he had been keeping to himself all along. He had been feeling guilty about his first marriage, to my mother, and now he was involved in a really bad second marriage. But now he sat up in bed and said, "Well, maybe if this marriage fails, too, it's not my fault."

That was what had been weighing on him for months before I was able to get back. Just learning how to question that—that the failure of another marriage would be his fault—he got well within the next three days.

So you may find that you're obsessed with something that you think is really true,

some issue that weighs the mind down, but you don't see any way out of it: You've got to learn how to question it. Sometimes talking to yourself in the right way can bring these things out into the open and clear up all kinds of problems.

And of course even if things really are true, then the next question is: Are they beneficial? Is it good for you to be thinking this thought, talking to yourself in this way? Where is this going to lead? Think about the consequences of your thinking.

Finally, have a sense of time and place. When is the right time to think, when is the time not to think, when is the time to come down hard on yourself and your internal chatter, and when is it time to be comforting?

One of the main defilements that keep people from staying on the path is a tendency to be overcritical with themselves: "This is no good, that's no good, I might as well give up." That's what the mind is saying—that's what its defilements are saying. But those thoughts are never beneficial. Those are the times when you have to talk to yourself in a comforting way. Part of the mind will object, saying that comforting thoughts are just Pollyanna-ish ideas. But remember, Pollyanna did well. She wasn't that stupid.

You look at all the great ajaans. They were really good at encouraging themselves. They recognized their faults, that's for sure, but they also recognized that they had good potentials within them, and they found those potentials where other people might not have seen them. After all, most of the ajaans came from really poor families in a very backward area of Thailand. They didn't have much education. People from outside looking at them would have said, "There's no chance, there's no way these people are going to gain awakening." Yet they found that they could. They proved the rest of the world wrong.

So you, too, can prove your defilements wrong by defying them. Tell yourself, "There's got to be something good here, otherwise I wouldn't have even thought of practicing." Learn to ferret out your good qualities.

This ability to talk to yourself skillfully is how you look after your mind. And it can make all the difference as to whether you'll stick with the practice or not. So be very careful about what you say to yourself. If anything that the mind is talking about begins to seem harmful, question it.

Because another thing that keeps people from making progress on the path is getting obsessed with an idea that proves to be harmful. So you have to learn how to step back from your obsessions. This is especially important as you're developing powers of concentration, because the stronger your concentration, the more you do tend to get obsessed. After all, you're supposed to be obsessed with the breath right now. But if you're alert, the basic method gives you the tools for turning that obsession into a kind of balance.

You're noticing, as the Buddha says, what you're doing to fabricate your sense of the body by the breath, what you're doing to fabricate your sense of the mind by the way

you perceive things—i.e., by the images you hold in mind, the words you hold in mind as you meditate. Then you notice what you can do to calm that fabrication—in other words, to bring things into balance, so that a centered state of mind is something you can maintain with ease, something you can stick with for long periods of time and not feel out of balance.

The more you gain a sense of balance with this exercise, the more you'll be able to recognize when your own mind is getting out of balance in other areas.

So learn how to talk to yourself with ease, because that's how you look after the mind.

In Harmlessness Is Strength

July 7, 2016

A while back, I was reading some introductory pamphlets on Buddhism. And there was a common pattern. They started out by saying that Buddhism is a religion of self-reliance. Then a few pages later they would say that Buddhism teaches there is no self. It's amazing that anyone, after reading those brochures, would continue to be interested.

The first statement is actually true. The Buddha teaches us to rely on ourselves. If we're going to find happiness in life, we have to develop the qualities of the path: virtue, concentration, and discernment. Or to develop meritorious activities: generosity, virtue, and meditation.

In the course of doing that, we develop a very strong sense of self, a healthy sense of self. But as the practice develops, we find that the sense of self becomes more and more just a concept that we use, a tool that we use. As long as it has its uses, we continue to hold it. It's like a toolbox: There are lots of different selves in there. Some of the selves will be useful for some times; others will be useful other times.

There comes a point, though, where you find the ultimate happiness and you don't need any tools anymore. That's when you can put them all down. But before you put them down, you've got to learn how to use them well. Otherwise, you can't get to the point where you can put them down.

The harmless selves in your toolbox are the ones you want to encourage, to put to use. Now, it may seem ironic that part of having a strong sense of self is that you try to make the self as harmless as possible. We tend to think of people with a strong sense of self as often being careless in their treatment of others, but that's not genuine strength. The more you harm others, the more you're creating a debt. The more debts you have, the weaker you are. So we're trying to live a life that's as debtless as possible, which means that we have to look inside to develop the qualities we need for happiness, so that we need to rely less and less on other people. We develop our own mindfulness, we develop our own concentration, our own discernment, so that as we go through life—not only as we're sitting here meditating but also as we deal with other people—we can be as light as possible.

Ajaan Suwat used to make a lot of this point. He was saying the Buddha teaches a lot about how this is not-self and that's not-self, but then he gets to that passage we chanted just now, "I am the owner of my actions." That's what you want to focus on, because that's where you are responsible. This is our motivation for developing the

mind, because all our actions do come out of the mind.

Many of us come to meditation for rest and respite. But we stay because we see that once the mind has rested, it can be a lot more skillful in dealing with situations around us.

It's just important that you keep in mind the fact that as long as you're acting, there's going to be some burden on other people. For example, with the precepts: The precept against killing comes down to two points—you don't kill and you don't order other people to kill. Sometimes you hear it as a precept of total harmlessness. But that's impossible. Even when you live a vegan lifestyle, it's a burden on some people: the people who have to work in the fields, the bugs that get sprayed. Even with organic produce, it's not that they don't use pesticides. They've just invented organic pesticides. They kill all the same.

So we try to live a relatively harmless life as best we can. And in the areas where we do have control over things, we try to be totally harmless. That keeps turning us back on ourselves: Where do we find the strength to maintain that harmlessness? After all, harmlessness requires a lot of care. And the things we used to depend on other people for: We've got to find resources to provide those things from within ourselves.

This way, we can go beyond what's just bright action and turn those bright actions into what the Buddha calls actions that are neither dark nor bright. Those are the ones that take us out of the cycle entirely. Only then can you be totally harmless.

This is why they say the arahants are the only people who live in the world without any debts at all. They're still eating the food that other people give them, but the merit that those people gain from feeding the arahants is multiplied many times over. Even the animals that were killed for that food—in case animals got killed someplace in the process—get merit too. In other words, the goodness that the arahants pump back into the world more than compensates for whatever burden they still place on it. But for the rest of us, we're still in a position where we're creating burdens. So we want to keep them as light as possible.

Now, this doesn't mean that you don't accept help from other people when they volunteer it. I saw a case years back: a former policeman in Singapore who was constantly afraid of being in debt to other people. He was living in relative poverty. He'd retired from the police force to look after his mother, and they were living on a very small pension. A group of people came one day to bring some food to me, and one woman had prepared extra food so that the policeman could take it home for him and for his mother. But he refused her gift, out of fear of being in debt to her. That offended her so much that she cursed him. Literally. She yelled, "I curse you!" three times.

That's being too worried about having debts. When people voluntarily give you help, you accept it, unless the help is inappropriate in one way or another. But as for appropriate help, those should be the kinds of debts you don't mind. It's the cases

where you're imposing on other people against their will: That's what you've got to watch out for. And try your best to be as light as possible on the world in general.

When the Buddha talks about the principles of the practice that have to do with other people, the primary one is being unburdensome. To be unburdensome, you learn how to be content with what you've got. And to be content with what you've got, you've got to develop your sources for true happiness inside.

So this issue keeps coming back to what you're doing right here, trying to develop a sense of well-being that you can feed on inside so that you're not feeding on people outside. This is why developing the pleasure of concentration is not a bad form of clinging. You may be clinging to it, but you're clinging to something good. It's a good attachment. If you don't have this form of pleasure, you're going to go sneaking out and finding your pleasure in other places, not all of which may be skillful, and many of which are harmful both to yourself and to others.

So learn to develop the strength of concentration, the strength that comes from having a sense of pleasure and well-being that you can feed on inside. Now, it's important that you have the right attitude toward it, as you're focused on the breath. In other words, you should stay focused on the breath and not on the pleasure. You focus on the breath in a way that gives rise to that sense of pleasure, but then you let the pleasure do its work, you don't have to go running after it or wallowing in it. As long as you're producing it, you've got what you need. The pleasure will do its work. You just allow it to spread around the body.

It's in this way that the Buddha said when he was practicing austerities, he didn't let the pain of the austerities overcome his mind, but when he found the pleasure of concentration, he didn't let the pleasure overcome his mind, either. That didn't mean he stopped doing the concentration—he continued doing it and got deeper and deeper into it—but he stayed focused on his object even as he kept producing the pleasure.

Because, as he said, if you don't have this kind of pleasure, then you keep running back to the pleasure of sensuality. Even though you may know the drawbacks of sensual pleasures—you can contemplate that list of the thirty-two parts of the body, that we chanted just now, over and over and over again, and think about all the other drawbacks of sensual pleasures—but if you don't have an alternative, the mind's going to go sneaking out for a bite of sensuality again.

So you've got to develop this source of well-being inside. This is how you become harmless. This is how you become strong—because the strength lies in the harmlessness.

When the Buddha began to get disillusioned with his austerities, he recalled the time when he'd gotten the mind spontaneously into jhana when he was a young child. The first question he asked himself was, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Is there anything blameworthy there?" Now, a blameworthy pleasure would be one that causes harm to

other people and would cloud the mind. There are lots of pleasures in the world that cloud the mind and harm other people. But this doesn't. He realized, as a result, that this was a pleasure he didn't have to be afraid of. So he worked on it, developed it, learned to tap into it whenever he needed it. And it became the main factor of his path to awakening.

So allow yourself to find what way of breathing gives the most pleasure, what way of settling the mind with the breath gives the most pleasure. This is a skill you need to develop in order to go through the world both with harmlessness and with strength.

Metta Through Samvega

September 29, 2017

There's a passage where the Buddha tells of an image that appeared to him before he left home to go out into the wilderness. He saw the whole world as a bunch of fish in a small dwindling puddle, fighting one another over that last gulp of water before they were all going to die. Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing that wasn't already laid claim to. Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but competition. He wanted to get out.

That image describes the feeling called *samvega*, a sense of dismay—or even terror—over the way life is lived, and an urgency to want to get out of it. But it's also a useful image to hold in mind when you're thinking of spreading thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is one of the guardian meditations, in the sense that it guards you from your own defilements. But it's also nourishment. And the image is useful, both to warn you about how to guard yourself and also how to gain nourishment from goodwill.

On the guardian side, it helps you look at the things that might give rise to ill will for other people. And usually, they all come down to the sense of competition. Those other people are getting in the way. They're doing something either to you or to people you love, and there's the sense that you're being violated by their actions. But when you look at the world as basically fish struggling to get that last gulp of water, you begin to realize that the things over which you would compete with other people are not really worth ill will. This isn't to say that, as we normally live in the world, we don't try to make things better than they are. But there are so many things that you realize you can't change—particularly while you're sitting here right now.

It's very easy—when the mind is quiet and you're off by yourself—to start thinking about old wrongs: people who've harmed you, the injustices you've been subjected to. That's when it's good to hold the image of the fish in mind: The things you're competing for, the things you're upset about, are just that last gulp of water, and then everybody's going to die. So why get tied up in ill will? You're harming yourself if you do. So that's the guardian side.

As for the nourishing side of goodwill: You realize that the happiness you're looking for now as you meditate is not in competition with anybody at all. Nobody's struggling to get to see your breath. You're not fighting with anyone else as you're trying to get the mind to settle down. It's all internal. You're not harming anyone and you can take joy in that fact. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talks about practicing goodwill, he says it has to be based on a life of virtue and a life where you keep your senses under control—or, as he says, you keep your senses calm.

In other words, you're not constantly looking for the newest flashy object or trying to listen to the latest tunes that are attractive. You realize that your true happiness comes from within. You don't have to keep searching outside, because the more you're searching outside, the more you're going to get into conflict with other people. But if you're looking for happiness in a way that's in line with the precepts—you're not harming anybody and you're not greedy for things—then it's a happiness that's pure. You can take joy in that fact. Your goodwill can be a goodwill that's sincere. It's not hypocritical.

If you're harming people, but then you say, "I have goodwill for everybody," your actions and your words aren't in line with each other. But if you're holding to the precepts and finding your happiness in ways that are in line with the precepts, you can take joy in the fact that you're not betraying your professions of goodwill. No one's competing with you for your happiness. And this gives energy to your practice.

You can settle down and show some goodwill for yourself now by working with the breath, finding a way of breathing that feels good for the body right now. That's goodwill for yourself. And if you can find this sense of well-being inside, you're going to be less hungry for things outside. So you're increasing your ability to find happiness in a way that doesn't get into any conflict, that doesn't require laying any claim. You don't have to push anybody out of the way or away from something they've already laid claim to.

So it's good, when you're spreading goodwill, to develop a sense of samvega to go along with it. That makes it a lot easier to step back from the things that you would normally want to fight over. You can say, "Nope, I don't need to fight over that. I don't need to have ill will for the people who are trying to take that—because I've got something better inside." There's a whole range of potentials inside that, once they're developed, can provide you with a happiness much better than anything you could find outside.

So you're developing both samvega and the quality called pasada, or confidence, that this is a good path. And as you look at your actions and realize that they don't get into conflict with anybody, your confidence in the path becomes more than just confidence. It becomes something you really know.

So on days when you find yourself tied up in thoughts of ill will, think about that image of the fish, realizing that you don't want to be one of those fish. There must be something better. If you're tied up in thoughts of ill will, you're like a fish upset at another fish for taking that gulp of water. But then, they're all going to die. If you can let go of your ill will out of a sense of samvega, and develop goodwill instead, you get yourself out of the puddle of water.

Goodwill doesn't mean that you have to like people. And you're not thinking of goodwill as a magic cloud that's going to spread out and make everybody happy. You

simply want people to find true happiness, to understand the way to find true happiness, and to actually have the willingness and strength to do that. In one of the phrases where the Buddha describes goodwill, he says, "May these beings look after themselves with ease." You're not necessarily saying you're going to be there for them. You're hoping that they'll be there for themselves, in line with the principle that happiness comes from each person's actions.

This way, you can step back from trying to get that last gulp of water. You realize that goodwill is something very easy to develop, even toward people who've taken all the water you might have wanted, because you know you've got something better, or at least the prospect of something better. And that thought will make the mind more inclined to want to settle down and be at ease with the breath and actually find that "something better" within.

Right Resolve in Real Life

July 11, 2017

Right resolve and right concentration are very closely connected. The beginning of the definition for right concentration says, "Secluded from sensuality; secluded from unskillful qualities...." It refers to the work of right resolve. You're resolving to stay away from sensuality through resolve on renunciation, which means you're not going to let yourself get engaged in sensual thinking. You're resolved on non-ill will, i.e., goodwill. And you're resolved on harmlessness, i.e., compassion, so that you can actually carry out those resolves. Those are the beginning conditions for getting into right concentration.

One of the suttas talks about two types of right resolve: mundane and noble. Mundane right resolve is the three resolves I just mentioned. Noble right resolve basically is the first jhana, when you've succeeded at clearing out of the mind things like sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. The concentration also helps with your right resolve, because a lot of these resolves are not easy to stick with. We can think in the abstract that, yes, it would be a good thing to have the mind free from things like sensual obsession, ill will, or harmfulness. But when you actually start living with human beings and putting up with the stresses and strains of daily life, it's very easy to slip into sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness.

This is where the concentration helps and gives you another place for the mind to feed, because the things that are going to pull us away from right resolve are mainly two: painful feelings and harsh words. Those are things the Buddha said we should learn how to tolerate. In other words, you have to build up patience and endurance for them. And concentration is really good for building up those qualities. When the Buddha's talking about patience, it's not simply a matter of gritting your teeth and putting up with hardships. It's learning how to find a sense of pleasure even in the midst of hardships so that you have something to sustain you. Learning how to get a sense of well-being as you settle in with the body, settle in with the breath: That's good sustenance.

So the two factors, right resolve, which is an aspect of discernment, and right concentration, go together. The discernment begins with the realization that, as the four noble truths say, if the mind is suffering, it's because of something in the mind. An abbot of a monastery in England was talking one time about a number of members of his community who were complaining all the time about the conditions in the monastery: This wasn't right; that wasn't right. And his analysis was, "They don't understand the four noble truths." If you spend your time complaining about things

outside—even if you're not complaining out loud, just complaining to yourself—you're going to miss seeing what you're doing to make the situation intolerable and hard to bear. And when you're focused on things outside of the mind—the pains, the unpleasant things—it's very easy to want to go for sensual thinking.

As the Buddha said, if you don't see any alternative to pain aside from sensual thinking, that's what you're going to go for: the sensual thinking. Then you start thinking about people who've caused you pain, who've said nasty things to you, done bad things to you or to people you love or respect or care for, it's very easy to feel ill will for them. And then you think, "Okay, once they're down, once I have the opportunity, I'm going to get some revenge": That's harmfulness.

So you've got to turn your thinking around, and concentration helps give you a foundation for doing that. If you can create a sense of well-being inside and feed on that, you're less likely to be feeding on things outside and less likely to be complaining about them. You can notice that something's not right, but if it's not interfering with your internal food source, it's a lot easier to bear with it.

The things that we have trouble bearing with are the ones that we bring inside, the things we try to feed on. Sometimes you bring them inside simply by the way you breathe. You get upset about something and your breath changes and becomes intolerable. It's not the situation that's intolerable. It's your breathing that's intolerable, but you lash out.

So you constantly have to be on the lookout for when the breath changes. One of the reasons why we practice here—sitting with our eyes closed, focusing on the breath—is to make ourselves more and more sensitive to this aspect of the body and its relationship to events in the mind. Then we can take that sensitivity out into our other activities, so that when someone says something displeasing or harsh or nasty, we look immediately at our breath to make sure that the breath doesn't get affected.

Remember the image the Buddha taught to Rahula when he said, "meditate like wind." That's breath as part of the wind element. It doesn't mean that you blow your mind around. It means that wind can blow disgusting things around, but the wind doesn't get disgusted, in the same way that when it blows pleasant things around, it doesn't get elated. It's just wind. So, when there are good or bad things in your environment, try to keep your mind just mind, just awareness. Try to keep your breath on an even keel.

When you've got the breath on your side, that's half the battle right there. Otherwise, your greed, aversion, and delusion hijack the breath and hold it hostage. They say, "Okay, we're going to be making a lot of unpleasant feelings here in your body until you do something in line with what we want. And only then will we let it go." That's a pretty high price, because what they want you to do can often be very unskillful. And you'll be the one to pay the price, not them. So don't let them take the

breath hostage. Try to be on top of how your breathing feels and learn how to breathe in a way that feels good, even when things are falling apart around you, because that way your head will be a lot clearer in spite of the situation, and you can think of the most skillful thing to do.

When you're not stabbing yourself with events around you, you can fall back on the mantra we talked about today: "I can take this. I can take this." You can survive these things because you're not bringing them in to wear yourself down. This doesn't mean that you're totally passive. When you see something out of line, something that's inappropriate, and you have the ability to change it, go ahead and change it. But there are a lot of things in the world, a lot of people in the world, that are very hard to change.

But, as the Buddha pointed out, when we're living with things we don't like or are separated from things we *do* like, the suffering is not in the things that we like or don't like. It's with the clinging and the craving—which means you've got to look inside. This is what right resolve deals with. It reminds you that craving and clinging are the things you've got to watch out for.

Sensual craving is number one. You've got to be very alert and very attuned to the harm done by a lot of your sensual fantasies. Even if you don't act on them, they get the mind in a certain mood. It starts getting sloppy. When it starts getting sloppy, this little slip doesn't matter. That little slip doesn't matter. "All I want is my pleasure." That's the attitude it has. And then when you do start acting out on these things, you can cause yourself a lot of trouble. You can cause other people a lot of trouble, too. So the concentration is there to give you an alternative pleasure. It's the combination of discernment and concentration, seeing the drawbacks of sensuality and having this alternative pleasure: That's what enables you to get past that sloppiness.

When you're dealing with difficult people, confronted with feelings of pain and harsh words, having a place of concentration really helps. Even if you can't occupy the whole body and fill it and suffuse it with pleasure down to every last cell, the fact that you have *some* part of the body that you can make comfortable allows you to find your sustenance there so that you have the strength to deal with the pain, the strength to deal with the unpleasant words. Because you've got this alternative source of food, you're not out there stuffing those things into your stomach and then finding that they give you indigestion.

Ajaan Lee says when someone else spits out some nasty words and you take them inside to think about, it's as if they've spit something on the ground and you've picked it up and are eating it. Of course you're going to get sick. And who are you going to blame? You were the one who picked it up. So even though people are aiming their words at you, you have to learn how to sidestep them and see the words as their kamma, as having nothing to do with you, even though they're saying your name over and over and over again. Just remind yourself that they're aiming at their *concept* of you, and they're not aiming directly at you. You're not their concept of you, so they can't hit

you at all.

In Thailand, one of the insults commonly hurled around is to call someone else a dog. And the different ajaans have interesting ways of dealing with that. Ajaan Funn says, "They call you a dog. You look around. You don't have a tail. And they don't have tails either. So if you're a dog and they look like you, then they must be dogs as well." Or Ajaan Lee's way of saying it, "You look around you. You know that dogs do have tails. You look at yourself. You don't have a tail. Okay, what they're saying isn't true. But there is an advantage when they call you a dog," he adds: "Dogs have no laws. They're free to do as they like."

So whatever the insult, learn how to look at it in a way that gets you out of the line of fire and allows you to see some humor in the situation. When you can laugh at their insults, you're far away from them. They can't hit you. Now, don't laugh out loud at them because that'll cause trouble. But you can laugh to yourself.

There's a story in the Canon where the monks are walking along as a group, and a teacher from another sect together with his student are following behind them. The student is praising the Buddha, and the teacher is denouncing the Buddha. The monks got upset because of the teacher's denunciation of the Buddha, but the Buddha told them, "Even when run-of-the-mill people praise me, they don't know what they're talking about. So why should I get upset when they're denouncing me?" Try to develop the attitude that if there really is something true about what they say, you can learn. Otherwise, you just let it go.

You can live with a lot of things in this world and not get tempted to do unskillful things in response. Because that's the main problem: When people do unskillful things to us, there's an immediate tendency for us to turn around and do unskillful things to them. And that goes for things that we like as well as for things we don't like.

So we've got to learn how to resist the temptation to respond to the unskillful things that we like in unskillful ways or to respond to the unskillful things that we don't like in unskillful ways. Right resolve helps right concentration because it brings in the element of discernment.

Simply learning how to breathe well, simply learning how to be calm in the face of something, doesn't deal with the whole problem. There's still the problem of the "I" and the "me" that gets in the way and feels injured by these things. If you can learn how to take those concepts apart to see whatever "I" you have doesn't need to be in the line of fire and isn't harmed by the other things that other people do to you, then you put yourself in a position of safety: safe not only from what they say, but also from your own potential unskillful reactions.

That way, you really can carry right resolve into the world with all of its messiness and keep your resolve intact. This principle applies to all the factors of the path. They're not designed simply for situations where practice is easy and conditions are good.

They're meant to be followed all the time: when they're easy, when they're hard, when the world outside is supporting you, when the world outside is not supporting you. You want to have the wherewithal in terms of your virtue and your concentration and your discernment to protect your path, i.e., to protect your thoughts, your words, and your deeds to keep them in line with what you know will ultimately lead to true happiness, to the true end of suffering. When you keep that goal in mind, you realize that a lot of the other baggage that you tend to carry with you is an unnecessary burden and you can let it go.

The Noble Truths Come First

March 20, 2017

We meditate because there's stress in our lives. The word "stress" here translates the Pali term, *dukkha,* which can mean anything from very subtle levels of stress all the way to very deep suffering. So whether we feel a lot of suffering in our lives or just a little bit of stress—however you translate the term—that's the problem that makes us want to come and meditate, to straighten out things inside. As the Buddha said, the reason we suffer is not because of uncomfortable or unpleasant things outside: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It's because of what we bring to these things from the inside: That's why we can suffer even from pleasant things. We suffer, we feel stress, because we cling. In fact, the clinging *is* the suffering.

The word clinging, *upadana,* can also mean feeding. We feed on things. And here the word "feeding," of course, means not just physical feeding, but also mental and emotional feeding. To be in a position where you have to feed is a very unstable position. You always have to worry about your source of food. That's why clinging—feeding—is suffering in and of itself.

The mind has a sense of lack. Because of the lack, it wants to fill it up. You fill it up a little bit and then it grows empty again. Our intestinal system, for instance, is not a sac. It's a tube. Whatever comes in, goes out. And the same with the mind's intestinal system: Things come in and give us a little bit of pleasure and then the pleasure's gone. We want something new, something new, something new all the time.

So it's a bad position to be in, having to feed. Because we identify ourselves as a being of one kind or another, that being has to feed. And then the feeding, of course, creates our sense of who we are: the way we feed, what we feed on. It's a vicious cycle.

We meditate to get out of this. We're going to work directly on our minds, because the problem is in the mind. It's not out there. So focus on what your mind is doing. See if you can bring the mind to a state of stillness, so that you can have a sense of satisfaction being here. One of the reasons we feel so hungry for everything and so overwhelmed by all the choices out there is that we have this limitless sense of dissatisfaction inside. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't satisfy our desires for sensuality. And that covers just one kind of desire. There are lots of other desires we have, lots of other hungers we have. So try to get a sense of satisfaction in being right here.

All of what we're doing here falls under the four noble truths. We see that there's suffering and that its cause is in the mind. And the solution has to lie in the mind as

well.

It's always important to remember that the four noble truths form the framework for right view, in other words, the right understanding about what we're doing. This is a point that a lot of people miss.

For most people, the three characteristics are right view. That's the framework, and then the four noble truths get interpreted inside that framework. In other words, they say that we suffer because we don't realize that things are inconstant or impermanent, or because we don't realize that there's no self, which is one of the interpretations of *anatta.* If we'd only learn the truth of these things, then we wouldn't suffer anymore. We wouldn't have any unrealistic expectations and we'd be content to just accept the way things are. That's what they say, but that wouldn't satisfy the mind's hungers.

The mind is hungry. If you could let go of your clinging and craving simply by seeing that things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, it would be like saying that because food is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and your stomach is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you're going to content yourself with not eating anymore. If you actually tried that, you'd starve. Or before you starved to death, you'd probably say, "Enough of that," and go back to eating again. That's the way the mind works. No matter how much you tell yourself that these things out there are not satisfactory, you say, "Well, that's all I've got." And sometimes that's how Buddhist wisdom is interpreted: a willingness to accept that "Well, this is all we've got, so let's satisfy ourselves with what we've got."

But the Buddha realized that the hungers of the mind, and the damage they cause, run a lot deeper than that. So instead of placing the three characteristics first, he put the four noble truths first, and then the three characteristics—which are actually not really *characteristics;* he called them *perceptions*—find their role within the framework of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to each.

You've got to comprehend suffering. You've got to abandon its cause. You've got to realize the cessation of suffering. And then you've got to develop the path to its cessation. These are duties we have to do—duties not in the sense of being imposed on us from outside, but duties that are simply built into the way things are, the way suffering works and the way its end is going to work. If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. If you don't want to put an end to suffering, you're free to go anywhere and do anything you like. But suffering is still eating away at you, so when you've had enough of it, there's no other way to solve the problem aside from following these duties.

The first three duties revolve around dispassion. In other words, to comprehend suffering is to see exactly what is the clinging that constitutes the suffering. And why do we like that clinging? We're feeding. We feel that we get our satisfaction out of feeding, but the Buddha wants you to see that there's suffering inherent in the feeding and to

really comprehend that suffering to the point where you feel dispassion for the whole process.

Then you look for *why* you're clinging. It's because you're thirsty. You crave. That's what you've got to abandon, which, again, you do by developing dispassion for the craving. That's what brings about the cessation of suffering. The dispassion itself is what puts an end to suffering. And how are you going to bring that about? Through developing the path. The path does this by giving you an alternative source of food: the pleasure, the rapture, the sense of fullness, the refreshment, that can come from getting the mind into concentration. You want to be able to tap into this refreshment because it's going to be your food on the path. And this is the one duty that doesn't immediately have to do with dispassion.

In fact, you've first got to have some passion for your concentration. You want dispassion for the craving. You want dispassion for the objects that you cling to. That dispassion is the third noble truth. But to see these things so that you can develop dispassion in those ways means that you've first got to have passion for the path. This is one case where you're not going to just say, "My concentration is inconstant, stressful, not-self. I'll let it go." You're actually fighting against those three perceptions.

You want to make the mind as constant and as easeful and as much in your control as you can. And, at this stage of the path, you apply those three perceptions to other things: anything that would pull you away from the practice of virtue, the practice of concentration, or the practice of discernment. You see those distractions as inconstant, stressful, not-self. These perceptions are there to develop a sense of dispassion for them.

It's only when the path has really completed its work—in other words, it's fully developed—that you then let that go, too. Then you apply the perceptions to the concentration itself. When you can let go of the concentration, along with the other factors of the path, you go beyond them to what the Buddha calls the property of the deathless. And if you have passion for that, you don't get fully awakened. But the fact that you've touched it means that you're awakened to some extent.

This is where it's important to realize that the three characteristics, or the three perceptions, don't cover everything. In other words, this deathless is not inconstant and it's not stressful. But still, the Buddha says you've got to let go of it. That's why he says *Sabbe dhamma anatta,* not just *sabba sankhara anatta:* Not just all fabrications, but all dhammas—all phenomena, fabricated or not—are not-self. That's the perception you apply to that experience. That's when you're totally free. You can develop dispassion for that, too.

That may seem like a subtle issue: Which comes first, the four noble truths or the three perceptions? It may sound like it's applicable only at the very end of the path, but it's important to keep this perspective in mind all along the way, for two reasons. The first is to remind yourself that the problem is not simply with the objects of your

awareness. It's with how you relate to them. The second is that—if you come up with anything that seems constant, seems permanent, like a ground of being of some kind, or some deep interconnectedness, a oneness, non-duality—you have to ask yourself, "Are you still clinging to it?" If you're clinging to it, if there's any sense of identity in there at all, there's going to be suffering, no matter how constant the object may seem. The fact that you're in a position where you're trying to feed on it: *That's* where the suffering lies.

So having these frameworks properly sorted out helps get you past those kinds of wrong release, as the Buddha would call them. In other words, you think you're released but you're not. You think you've reached something really permanent but you haven't. So this is your protection.

Also, of course, there's the whole question of how to interpret those three perceptions—the tendency to make them metaphysical truths, i.e., characteristics of things-as-they-are, especially if you get to the question of "Is there a self? Is there no self?" The Buddha calls those questions "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views." In other words, you get entangled in the brush and the thorns off to the side of the path.

If we had to spend all our days arguing as to whether there is or isn't a self, we'd never be able to practice. We wouldn't have the time. We wouldn't have the opportunity. But if we see "not-self" simply as a perception, a label that you apply to things when you need to develop dispassion for them, then not-self, instead of being a thicket, is actually a machete for cutting through the thicket. It develops dispassion, and when the dispassion has done its work, you can put the labels down.

There was a controversy years back in Thailand as to whether nibbana was self or not-self. The issue got so politicized that it made its way into the newspapers and on TV. So someone asked Ajaan Maha Boowa whether nibbana was self or not-self, and he answered, "Nibbana is nibbana." In other words, you don't apply either of those perceptions to nibbana. It's something beyond. But that's because it is total dispassion. There's no clinging there at all.

So the clinging is suffering, not because we cling to impermanent things, but because just the act of clinging in and of itself entails suffering.

Keep that in mind because that's what we're working on as we practice. You're going to cling to the meditation. That's fine for the time being. Remember Ajaan Chah's example: Coming back from the market, you've got a banana in your hand, and someone asks you, "Why are you carrying the banana?" You say, "I want to eat it." "Are you going to eat the peel, too?" "No." "Then why are you carrying that?" Ajaan Chah says, "How are you going to answer them?" As he said, you answer them out of desire, your desire to give the right answer. And that's what gives rise to the discernment that allows you to say, "The time hasn't come to let go of the peel. If I let go of the peel now and held the banana flesh in my hand, it'd become mush."

So you have some passion for your practice as you try, at the same time, to develop dispassion for things that would pull you away. You apply the three perceptions wherever you need to develop that sense of dispassion. When the path is fully developed, then you can foster dispassion for that, too. Because that's what we're working on: the way the mind relates to things, trying to feed on them all the time out of a sense of passion for them. We're such compulsive feeders that even when we have our first experience of the deathless, we're going to try to feed on that, too. We're like a little baby who crawls around and sees everything as stuff to put in his mouth.

But when you find that there is something where there really is no clinging in it, there really is no sense of hunger, that's when you realize that the feeding was the problem all along. And that's when you can put everything down.

So remember to keep the framework and the contents of the framework in the right order. The three perceptions are there just to help you within the framework of the duties of the four noble truths. The four noble truths come first because they alert you as to where the real problem is. If you keep your eyes on that, then it's hard to go wrong.

The Power of Truth

May 23, 2016

One of the Buddha's insights is that truths don't just represent the way things are. In other words, they're not just an act of reporting. They also incite action. They have a power. Certain truths will make you do things, allow you to look at things in a certain way, which will then allow you or compel you to act.

This is one of the reasons why the noble truths are noble, because they get you to act in a noble way. The Buddha wasn't interested in simply saying things that were true. As you may remember, his standard for the things he would say was that they be true, beneficial, and timely. The beneficial part had to do not only with the meaning of the words, but also with what they would get you to do.

And this is one of the reasons why the two words, Dhamma and *attha,* go together so often in the Canon. *Attha* is not only the meaning of the words, but also the goal to which they aim, the profit and benefits they bring about. So when you ask about the *attha* of a teaching, you're asking both about the meaning of the words and about where they lead, what their pay-off is. What is this truth for? What good does it do? What does it lead you to do? Truths have power. They do lead in a certain direction.

There are lots of true things you can say about reality that can actually be contradictory—or at least they sound contradictory. There are ways you can look at the aggregates and say that they're stressful, and yet the Buddha also admitted that there is pleasure in the aggregates. You can't say they're 100% stress. So, the question is then, which truth are you going to focus on? And that's answered by asking what the result is going to be. What is it going to get you to do? If you focus on how pleasant the aggregates are, you're going to hold onto them. If you focus on their stressful side, then you're going to do what you can so as not to be trapped by them.

The noble truths are noble not only because they get you to do noble things, but also because they get you to a noble attainment. The Buddha talked about two kinds of searches in life. There's the search for happiness in things that will change. He said that there's nothing noble about that. And then there's the search for happiness in things that don't change—no aging, no illness, no death. That kind of search, he said, is noble.

To help with that search, we look at things in terms of the four noble truths. There are certain duties that go along with them, and when we fulfill those duties, they'll take us to something deathless. That experience of the deathless is what guarantees that they really are true, and really are noble. We might look at the truths, think about them, and decide that, yes, they seem reasonable. But as the Buddha said, just because something

is reasonable doesn't mean that it really is true. The fact that they're reasonable simply aids in giving us confidence or conviction in their truth. That's one of his observations that go against our understanding in the West that things like conviction or faith are opposed to reason. We have that belief because there's a major religion in our society that extols things you have to take on faith even though they go contrary to reason. That's why we think that reason and faith are two radically different things.

But, as the Buddha said, just because the four noble truths seem reasonable, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're true. There has to be a further test. Their reasonableness is what gives you the faith and conviction that they're worth the test. If something doesn't make sense, if it contradicts itself, it doesn't really invite you to test whether it's true. But if something seems reasonable, it seems worthy of the test.

So you put it to the test—and you put yourself to the test, too, because these truths demand a lot of you. They demand that you look at your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—and particularly your thoughts—in a way that often will require you to let go of things you really like. That's because you learn how to look at the thoughts as part of a causal process. When you think in this particular way, where does it lead? When you think in a different way, where does it lead? This is what's special about the noble truths: They focus on this process of what the mind is *doing* with the truth. In this way, they contain the seeds for their own transcendence.

There's a passage where Anathapindika is talking to a group of wanderers. He wanted to see the Buddha, but it was too early in the morning—the Buddha and the monks were out on their alms rounds—so he goes to talk to some wanderers instead. They ask him first off, "What does the Buddha believe? What are his views?" And it's interesting. Here's Anathapindika, who's a stream-enterer by that time, he's already seen the deathless, and yet he says, "I don't really know the extent of the Buddha's views"—remembering, of course, that what the Buddha taught was just a handful of leaves, as opposed to the leaves of the forest, which were all the various types of knowledge he got in his awakening.

So the wanderers ask him, "In that case, what do *you* believe? What are your views?" And he replies, "I'll be happy to tell you my views, but first you tell me yours." And so the different groups have their different positions. Some say that the world is eternal. Some say it's not eternal. Some say it's finite; some say it's infinite. The body is the same thing as the soul; the body is different from the soul. After the death of a Tathagata you can say either that he exists, or he doesn't exist, or both, or neither: the standard list of positions on the hot philosophical issues of the day.

As Anathapindika then points out, each particular view is stressful. It's inconstant, it's put-together, and everything that's inconstant and put-together is going to lead to stress if you hold onto it. So as you cling to that view, you cling to stress.

After that, they say, "Okay, what's your view?" And so he says, "Whatever is

inconstant and put-together is stressful. Whatever is stressful is not me, not my self, not what I am." They say, "Well, you're holding onto that. You're clinging to that. So you're going to suffer from that, too." He says, "No, following this view, I see the escape from it." That's because it focuses you back on the process of how you relate to truths, and how you relate to your views, so it enables you to let go of it when you no longer need it, when it leads to nothing but stress. And in the letting go, that's when it leads to the deathless.

So these are special views, and they're special because of their power. They lead you to a certain kind of action. They lead you to look at your own mind carefully. What are you doing? How do you relate to your thoughts, words, and deeds? How do you relate to your beliefs? How do you relate to your practices and all the things that we tend to cling to? What are the results of that clinging? How can you learn how not to cling to them? We need certain views, and we need certain habits and practices, and even certain assumptions about ourselves, in order to practice. But how do you use these things so they don't just keep you trapped? When they've done their work, how can you learn to let go?

In the beginning, you learn not to pride yourself on your views or your habits. You don't brag about them and you don't get into needless arguments with people about them—because when you get into arguments, there's always the question of who wins the arguments, and that leads to a certain amount of pride, and that pride will cause a problem. You get into arguments only when you see that there's a chance to correct a view that causes harm to the person holding it. So, avoiding needless arguments is, on the beginning level, how you begin to use these parts of the practice without being tied down to them and without using them to create needless trouble for yourself.

Remember the image of the snake. As the Buddha said, you try to grasp a snake, and if you grasp it wrongly—in other words, you grasp it by the tail—it's going to bite you. If you grasp it rightly, then it's not going to cause any trouble. You take a forked stick and you pin it down right behind its head. And no matter how much it may writhe around the stick, or even around your arm, it can't do you any harm.

But notice: In both cases, you're holding the snake, but in one case you're holding it in a way that doesn't cause you any harm. The views are things that you have to hold onto, but you need to learn how to hold onto them properly. You hold to these truths in a proper way because they lead you to something beyond them—if you're holding them properly. Some people would say, "Why not just avoid having any views at all?" Well, that would be like not holding the snake at all. And if you don't hold the snake, how are you going to get the advantage that you can get from snakes? If you can get their venom, you can use it to create anti-venom. If you don't hold onto the snake at all, you're not going to get any benefit from it. So you do have to hold on. It's simply a question of *how* you hold on.

You have to remember that you're holding on for the purpose of getting past

suffering. That's what the four noble truths all keep pointing to, simply laying things out: There's suffering and there is its cause. There's a cessation of suffering and there is a path to its cessation. The cessation is obviously where you want to go. In that way, the truths give you a goal, they give you an *attha,* a purpose. And they get you to act toward that purpose. That's their *attha,* too. That's the power of these truths. Then they reveal their power in being genuinely true and noble when they lead to a real experience of the deathless.

When that comes, you naturally put them aside, because you realize that talking about the deathless or having views about the deathless is one thing, but actually experiencing it is something else. The experience is what you're going for. And the experience is such that you don't need the words to stay with it. It stays on its own.

So when you consider the various truths in the world, you'll notice that some have a lot of power, and some have very little power. Certain facts you can learn and they don't have any impact on your behavior. Those are things that are true, but not necessarily beneficial. Then there are certain truths that, if you act on them, are going to actually cause trouble. Those are not truths you want to get involved with in any way at all.

What you want are truths that are true, and beneficial, and right for you at this time. And the noble truths, as the Buddha said, are categorically true. In other words, they are always true. They always apply to every situation. So learn how to apply them in the right way so that they can really reveal their power, the power that makes them noble.

To Suffer Is an Active Verb

August 22, 2018

When we say that we suffer, we usually think that we're on the passive receiving end of the suffering. It's something imposed on us, something to which we have to submit. In some of our more mature moments, we realize that there are times when we're adding to our own suffering, but we tend to see this more clearly in other people than we see it in ourselves. This is one of the reasons why, when we come to the four noble truths, the Buddha's analysis of suffering, we have to take them on faith—because, in his analysis, to suffer is an active verb. It's something we're doing actively. It's a choice we make. It's a choice we make badly, out of ignorance. The suffering is in the activity of clinging.

There was a scholarly book a while back that analyzed the Buddha's first noble truth as if suffering were the five aggregates. The author went on to say that, because the five aggregates cover all of our experience, maybe the word *dukkha* doesn't mean "suffering." Maybe it means "experience." Other people have taken that idea and have run all over the place with it. But what the scholar said was not in line with what the Buddha said. Suffering, he said, is the five *clinging*-aggregates. Where there are aggregates without clinging—say, in an arahant—there's no suffering. Even when there's pain in the aggregates, the arahant's mind isn't suffering. It's the act of clinging to these things, out of passion, out of delight in them because we find them alluring: That's the suffering.

And it's something we're doing right now. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't have us try to go back into the past and ask, "What did I do to deserve an illness, a mental state, a situation in life?" He said that if you tried to trace all those things back, you'd go crazy. In fact, he said, you can't trace back and find a beginning point for the ignorance that underlies suffering. But you can see what you're doing to sustain it now.

So we're not here to find the beginning points of these things. We're here to find out how we're sustaining them, how we keep them going. That's something we're doing in the present moment, which means it's something we can watch in action.

This is one of the reasons why the quality of alertness in mindfulness practice is focused not on the present moment in general, on whatever happens to pop up in the present moment, but specifically on what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. That's where alertness is focused because that's where the problem lies—and also where the potential for the solution lies.

We look to see the level of suffering in the mind, and then try to see how it's

connected with what we're doing. The Buddha says to watch it to see it go up and down so that you can detect the causes. When are you going to watch it best? When you're getting the mind into concentration. That's when you're least distracted. You get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being so that you become more sensitive to slight instances of stress or suffering. Then you try to notice them go up and down. When they go up, ask yourself, "What did I do?" When they go down, "What did I do, or what did I stop doing?" That's how you're going to see the cause.

At the same time, that's how you're going to see the allure. We don't think that we like to go for suffering, but suffering and pleasure are part and parcel of the same thing. Ajaan Chah's image is of a snake. You see that the snake has two ends: an end that has teeth and an end that doesn't have teeth. You figure that the end without teeth is a safe end to catch hold of, without realizing, of course, that the end without teeth is connected to the end with teeth. And the end with teeth will turn around and bite you. We grab after the aggregates. We grab after the allure of the aggregates. And they bite.

The irony in all of this is that the aggregates themselves are things that we put together. We've got potentials coming in from the past for form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. And then, for the sake of having aggregates to use, we fashion them—we put them together—into actual aggregates. The Pali in this particular sutta is rather strange: It says that we do this for the sake of feelingness, for the sake of formness, for the sake of perceptionhood, and so on. It's a strange statement, but the important part of the statement is the "for the sake of."

We have a plan for these aggregates, maybe a confused and not-very-conscious plan, but we put them together for a purpose. We want some pleasure out of them. And in anticipation of the pleasure, we grab hold of them. Oftentimes we grab hold of them even when they're producing pain, because we're afraid that if we don't grab hold of *some*thing, what is there? We identify ourselves with our grabbing hold, with our feeding off of these things. Our fear is that if we stop feeding off these things, we won't be. We won't exist.

So our very sense of who we are or what we are gets all tied up in our suffering, which makes it hard to separate these things out. It's like you're taking off your arm or your leg to examine it. This is why the analysis of your sense of self into a whole committee of selves is useful. You try to identify with the self that's doing the concentration. As for any other self that's going to come up and propose that you go off and enjoy some of the hindrances, you can dis-identify with it. And then take it apart. Take off its arms and legs. Try to see: "Where is the allure there? Why do I go for these things?" And because the mind has many layers of deception, you're going to have to look at this again and again and again.

Here, too, the approach of watching the level of stress go up and go down while you try to notice, "What did I do just now?": That's one of the ways in which you can pry these layers away. You're looking right at the moment when you're actually making the

choice. If you looked at it a few seconds later, you might come up with another reason for why you did something. We're very good at making up reasons for why we do things, especially after the fact, so if you want to see through the make-believe, you've got to watch these things right as they're happening.

What is the allure right now? When you really see it, you begin to realize that it's not really worth it. A sense of dismay arises. You realize how stupid you've been. This is when you develop a sense of disenchantment, or *nibbada*. This word also means the feeling you have when you've been feeding on something and you suddenly realize that you've had enough. You really don't want it anymore. There's a touch of dismay there, but also a sense of sobering up—because when you see the extent to which you're responsible for your own suffering, that's when you become mature. This is why one of the epithets for the Buddha was that he was exceedingly mature.

He saw that suffering lies in what we're doing right now. It's not being imposed on us from outside. We're the ones who are actively going out and creating it, engaging in it, doing it. So when you see that this is an activity that's not worth it, you can drop it. That's how it's droppable: because it's an activity. You simply learn how to stop doing it. If this sense of disenchantment goes deep enough, it's followed by dispassion. And dispassion is followed by release. You can stop the suffering because you can stop *doing* the suffering. And that's what counts.

So when things come up in life, don't ask yourself, "What kamma did I do in the past that's making me suffer now?" or "What is somebody else doing to me that's making me suffer?" The question is: "What am I doing right now? To what extent am I actively creating the suffering? To what extent can I see that it really is true that to suffer is an active verb, that it all comes from my own actions?" When you see that, you also see the opportunity not to do those things anymore. You're not compelled to do them anymore. That's when you're free. As for where the outside conditions came from in the past, that's no longer an issue. The suffering you were creating moment to moment was the only suffering that was weighing down the mind. And now you've stopped.

Rooted in Desire

August 28, 2017

The Dhammapada starts with two verses on the topic of the power of the mind: "The mind is the forerunner of all dhammas. The mind is their chief; they're made of the mind." And we may say, on one level, that this sounds reasonable. The way you look at things, the way you act, will have an influence on what you experience.

But it goes a lot deeper than that. *Every*thing comes out of the mind. Everything you experience comes from the factor of fabrication in dependent co-arising that's even prior to the experience of the six senses. We sometimes tend to think of the mind as being something passive, receiving input from outside and then responding in the old stimulus-response mode: that only after the stimulus do we play a role in shaping things outside. But that view is much too passive.

Things start with the movement of the mind outward. That's where all the trouble comes from, and so that's where the problem has to be solved. As the Buddha said, everything is rooted in desire. All dhammas are rooted in desire—everything except nibbana is rooted in desire. You look at the four noble truths: The causal truths, i.e., the second truth and the fourth—the cause of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering—are actions. There's the action of craving and clinging. There's the action of the desire in right effort.

So the question is, which desires are you going to follow? And how deep does it go, this question of how the mind is shaping things? A lot deeper than you might think. This is why insight comes from asking questions about actions, because the results of actions are pleasure and pain. And the Buddha says, "Look at that pain. Where is it coming from? What's the cause?" And he tells us to look into the mind for the cause.

Of course, to deal with pain, we need to have a sense of pleasure someplace as our foundation, which is why we practice concentration. Right effort leads to right mindfulness. We're remembering to give rise to skillful qualities and we're remembering to try to abandon unskillful ones. Right mindfulness then forms the theme around which right concentration develops. So this desire to put an end to suffering leads to mindfulness, and from there it leads to getting the mind to settle down and be really still in concentration with a sense of well-being so that it can look at what else is going on at a deeper level.

The greater the stillness of the mind, the more subtle the movements of the mind you'll be able to see. And you keep wanting to ask: "Is there any uptick in the level of stress? Any lowering of the level of stress?" If you can catch that, you ask yourself then:

"What did I just do? What arose together with the stress? And what passed away together with the stress?"

This is why the cause of stress is called *samudaya,* something "arising together," because, after all, part of your experience is based on past actions. And it's hard sometimes to see the relationship between a past action and a present one. As the Buddha said, the workings of kamma are really complex. Sometimes an action may not date just from your last previous lifetime, but from lifetimes before that. How would you ever track that connection down? What you *can* track down is what you're doing right now.

And as I said, in dependent co-arising, what you're doing right now—the fabrications that usually come out of ignorance—come prior to input from the senses, even the sixth sense, i.e., the mind that's aware of ideas. So you're already shaping things before you have any input at all. What we're trying to do as we practice is to shape things with knowledge, with awareness, alertness. That's what the questions focusing on stress do, because otherwise you just go flowing through the various causal links in the chain without paying much attention to what you're doing. It's become so natural that you don't see the extent to which you're fabricating things.

Only when you ask questions do you begin to notice, "Oh, there was something happening there. I did this, and this resulted." So learning how to ask the right questions at the right time is an important part of gaining discernment. The Buddha said that it's a sign of people of discernment: how they approach a question, how they frame the question, how they apply it. His observation applies to the discernment related to understanding not only how to explain ideas and to ask questions about ideas you've heard explained, but also how to question the workings of your own mind. What are the perceptions that shape the way you're going about things? What are the assumptions? The assumption of "self" is a big one. The various perceptions about your relationship to the world: Those are also things you've got to learn how to question.

And a good place to start is your relationship to your breath. How do you focus on the breath in a way that gives rise to well-being? How do you focus on it in a way that gives rise to stress? What's the difference? This is something we have to look at over and over and over again, because only when you've been over and over something many times do you see the details.

Ajaan Lee's image is of walking back and forth on a path: You see the little things on the side of the path you might not have noticed if you had walked down the path just once. The little changes. Certain plants are growing. Certain trees are dying. Certain flowers are blooming or wilting. Certain animals are crawling across the path or on the side of the path. If you're preoccupied with other things, you're not going to see these things no matter how many times you go back and forth. But if you're curious and observant, you'll see things on the side of the path that weren't there before. You'll notice: Something's changed. Something's up.

In particular, you want to look at your actions. What are the desires underlying your actions? We all know that desires tend to be blind. How do you bring some vision to them, so that you see not only what you want to see, but also what's actually going on? The Buddha gives you lots of detailed instructions as to where to look, what kinds of questions to ask.

Now, you may find that the particulars of your situation right now require slightly different questions that derive from the Buddha's basic ones. The trick lies in learning how to tweak them so they're just right for you. The point that doesn't change is that the questioning can't be done in the abstract. It has to be focused on what you're doing right here, right now, as you get the mind into concentration. That's the ideal action to look for, even when you're engaged with other themes of meditation aside from the breath.

There should always be the question: What are you doing? And are the results consistent with what you've done before? When you're contemplating the body—the 32 parts, like we chanted just now—there are days when it's easy to visualize the different parts of the body, and say, "Yeah, that's all there is to the body." Why are those days different from other days when you resist seeing the body as unattractive? Why is it so easy to shift back to your old perception that the body's something good-looking, something attractive? What was the desire that skewed your perceptions?

This question focuses on a particular action, which is why the Buddha set the four noble truths as his definition for right view, because as he said, the cause of suffering is an action. The path to the cessation of suffering is an action. This is to keep our minds always in that framework. The problem is that even in Buddhist circles, people shift away from that framework to a more passive view.

A couple of months ago, when I was working on the book on the noble eightfold path, I was reading other books explaining the noble eightfold path. And I was struck by how many times the authors, when explaining right view, would make a brief mention of the four noble truths and then shift almost immediately to the three characteristics, saying that the four noble truths are true because things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self. That's the reality out there, and we suffer because we cling to things that change. The implication here is that if we didn't cling, then we could still live with things that change and there would be no problem. And on one level, that's true. But that assumption doesn't bring us to a place of real peace. To get to that place, you have to see that the things are changing because your *desires* are changing. It's not that you're sitting here just misunderstanding the nature of things and trying to force some permanence on things that won't be permanent. *Any* act of clinging is going to cause suffering. Even if you cling to the experience of the deathless, you're going to suffer.

Another problem with basing right view on the three characteristics is that the implication is that if you don't resist change, then you'll be okay. You're told, "Just go

with the flow. Don't have any fixed views. Allow everything to change." This idea is sometimes even used to justify changing the Dhamma. Of course, the Dhamma's going to change. But the Buddha didn't regard that as a positive thing. His image was of a drum: A crack develops in the drum, and so you place a peg in the crack. Another crack develops. You place another peg. Eventually, the whole drum is nothing but pegs. And it's not going to make the resonant sound the old drum made when it was one solid piece of wood. Changes in the Dhamma don't go in a good direction. So the Buddha's not simply saying, "Well, learn how to accept change and you'll be okay." He's saying, "You're creating things that are changing. And then you're latching onto them. You're clinging to them. That's suffering." In fact, your clinging is creating things from which you suffer.

So you've got to turn around and look at that action of clinging. And be sure to make use of the help that the Dhamma gives. Don't try to change the Dhamma, because otherwise it's not going to be as helpful to you.

So remember, the basic framework is the four noble truths. And the four noble truths start with actions. Our experience is all based on action. So whenever there's suffering, you ask yourself, "What are the actions leading to that?" Get the mind still enough so that it can see and know where to look.

The problem isn't out there with the world. The problem is in here. We play a role in creating our experience and then we forget about it. And then we blame the experience. So turn around. Look at the part of the mind that's constantly fabricating things in ignorance, under the force of desire. Bring some knowledge there through your questions, through your mindfulness and alertness and all the other good qualities you're trying to develop in the concentration. That's when you get to the root of the matter.

Then when you get to the root, everything falls apart. But it doesn't fall apart in a bad way. It opens up to something that's unfabricated, that won't change. When there's no desire to create dhammas, we open to the end of dhammas, where there's no clinging, no suffering at all. It's like finding the right key and putting it in the right keyhole to unlock things so that everything good will open up.

The Core of Experience

September 24, 2017

When I was up in the Bay Area last week, I came across a new word: corelessness. Apparently, the latest fashion is to claim that the Buddha said we are coreless, and that that's the meaning of *anatta*. In other words, there's a jumble of karmic activities that make up a human being. That's what you are. The *anatta* teaching, in this interpretation, is not a not-self teaching; it's a no-self teaching. It answers the question of what you are, saying that what you are has no core. You're like a karmic fuzz ball. All the fuzz that's picked up as the fuzz ball moves across the floor under the force of the wind is held together only by static electricity, but there's no real core there. This is supposed to represent what the Buddha taught about what we are.

The problem is that the Buddha never talked about what we are. That was one of the questions he consistently avoided. If you say that there's no core there, then when kamma ends in the attainment of nibbana, there'd be nothing left. Nothing would exist there. And the Buddha wouldn't have gone to such trouble to say that an arahant after death can't be said to exist or not exist or both or neither. It would be obvious: The arahant wouldn't exist. End of problem. But that wasn't his solution to the question. And it's no solution to anything at all.

The Buddha was wise enough to see that however you define yourself, you limit yourself. So he wasn't concerned with limiting us or defining us. He wanted to help us find an unlimited happiness, because that was his main purpose: to show us, not what we are, but exactly how far the quest for true happiness can go. What kind of happiness is really worth the effort put into it? Is there a happiness that doesn't change? Something that, once you attain it, isn't going to turn on you? And he found that such a happiness does exist. It's the happiness of release, which he actually said is the core of all experience.

All dhammas, he said, have release as their core. For "core," he used the word *sara,* the heartwood of a tree. But that's what it basically means: essence, core. Release is the only core to be found in experience, but there *is* a core there. If there were no core at all, we'd just be floating around with nothing of any real solid importance to us or anybody else. It would be a miserable world. And you'd say, "Well, people can just go and do what they want, because there's nothing really there that genuinely matters."

But, as the Buddha said, suffering matters. Happiness matters. And you'd think that, given the fact that such a happiness is available, people would want it. Yet, for most people, when they search for happiness, they look around and ask, "Well, who's doing something that looks like it might make them happy? Or who looks attractive? Or who

looks interesting?" And they take those people as their models without really stopping to examine carefully: Are those people really happy? And if a solid happiness is possible, why do we content ourselves with lesser things?

So there is a core to experience and it is a challenge, which may be another reason why people don't like to think about it. It forces them to change their ways too much. But you have to ask yourself: "Are you serious about being happy?" And "serious" here doesn't mean grim, but simply sincere. Do you sincerely want to be happy? Do you want to take your desire for happiness as something important? For the Buddha, that's the beginning of wisdom and discernment: taking your desire for true happiness as having essential value. And then, from the assumption, discernment develops.

It develops through asking the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of discernment. It's wise first because it realizes that happiness is something that comes from your actions. It doesn't depend on who you are. Second, there is such a thing as long-term happiness. There are forms of happiness that don't simply come and go in an instant. And third, long-term is better than short-term.

The Buddha's question here underlies the practice of what's called merit: doing good things, being generous, being virtuous, having the restraint of goodwill for everybody. It's interesting that goodwill is regarded as a restraint. It basically holds your actions in check, the actions that would be harmful. What's unlimited about goodwill, of course, is that you extend it to everyone.

But then the Buddha goes beyond those practices, because, as he said, on their own they don't lead ultimately to nibbana. They don't lead to release. You're looking for a happiness that's more than just long-term. You're looking for a happiness outside of time entirely so that time cannot touch it. That's the core we're looking for.

This is where the Buddha expands on that question on discernment, through the questions about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. If we're looking for something that's really beyond time, then it can't be inconstant. If it's true happiness, it can't be stressful. And if it's anything less than that, you don't want to hold onto it as self. You don't even want to hold onto release as self, because the idea of self implies clinging, and clinging stands in the way.

So we take the issues of "my long-term welfare and happiness" and translate them into the questions on the three characteristics, or, rather, the three perceptions. "Long-term" corresponds to the question about inconstancy. "Happiness" corresponds to the question on stress. And "my," of course, corresponds to the question on self or not-self. So when you encounter things on the path of your practice, ask yourself, "Is this constant or inconstant?" If it's inconstant, it's stressful and it's not-self, then it's nothing you'd want to hold onto. It's not the core you're looking for.

Now, you will find, though, that in the course of the path, there are certain things

you do have to hold onto temporarily, or provisionally—things like virtue, concentration, and discernment. Those are the skills you need to develop to get to release. After all, you can't use release to get to release. You have to use what you've got. And the things you've got—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness, what the Buddha calls the five aggregates—are things that if you simply cling to them, are going to cause problems, going to cause suffering. In fact, the clinging will be suffering. But you can turn them into a path, which switches their role as part of the first noble truth, about suffering, to part of the fourth: the path to the end of suffering.

Like you're doing right now: You've got your body sitting here, which is form. You're holding onto the perception of the breath to give rise to a feeling of ease. You're talking to yourself about the breath: That's fabrication. And your consciousness is aware of all these things. This is how you take the five aggregates and make them a path. Those are some of the things you hold onto provisionally as part of the Buddha's strategy.

But whatever comes up in the course of your meditation, if you want to test to see whether it's the ultimate goal, you pull out those three questions: Is it constant or inconstant? Stressful or not stressful? And then if it's stressful and inconstant, is it worth holding onto, worth claiming as you or yours? These questions are your touchstone to find out what really is gold in here, what really is of solid value. Because there is something of solid value. The happiness that the Buddha points to has a solid value. It's something of infinite worth. And it can be touched inside.

So we, as human beings, have this potential. Other human beings have this potential too, which is why we want to respect them. This connects with the fact that the Buddha never says that we're coreless. He doesn't say what we *are,* but he *does* say we have the potential to find a deathless happiness. It's there. And it's the core, the most valuable part of all experience.

So keep that in mind as you practice. The question is always, "What am I doing, what are the results I'm getting from my actions, and are they up to standard?" You want to make the Buddha's standards the ones by which you measure things if you're really sincere about your happiness. Because that's what it comes down to: the level of your own sincerity.

As the Buddha said, one of the treasures of the mind is *ottappa,* compunction, which is the opposite of apathy. Apathy says, "Well, I'll do what I want and I don't care about the results." Compunction places all the importance on the results, regardless of whether an action is something you like or dislike. The issue isn't whether you like the causes; the issue is whether the results are worth the effort. In other words, you focus on "What does this action lead to?" The treasure of compunction is something the Buddha encourages us to develop within us so that we can find the happiness he found in the same way that he found it: by looking inside and seeing that there is a core in here—not something you would say is you or yours, but it's a core and it's there. And that's what

gives value to everything else.

Self View & Conceit

May 26, 2017

We read about the various fetters that are abandoned in the practice, and there's a temptation to want to reason our way past them, but that's not how the practice works. It works by a process of cause and effect. The fetters are abandoned as the effect of the practice and not the effect of reasoning things through. We practice virtue, concentration, and discernment, and they, in turn, are dependent on developing certain factors like heedfulness, conviction, and desire. After all, the path itself needs to be put together. It's a fabricated thing.

And there has to be a desire to do it. If we don't have any desire, we don't fabricate things. It's one of those truths of the will where it's not going to happen unless you want it to happen. Wherever there's a desire, there's going to be becoming. And becoming involves a sense of self. What the path needs is a skillful sense of self.

The Buddha talks about this quite a bit: "The self is its own mainstay." In other words, you have to depend on yourself. If you don't depend on yourself, who are you going to depend on? Who can do the work for you? It's not the case that someone is going to come and save us from ourselves. We have to figure out for ourselves where we're lacking skill.

That's one of the definitions of *avijja:* The cause of suffering is a lack of skill. We're being unskillful, so what are we going to do to get past it? We have to depend on ourselves. Nobody can give us a skill. We have to learn it ourselves. So as with any desire, there's going to be your sense of self as a producer and the self as a consumer. The producer is the one who can do this. The consumer is the one who's going to enjoy the results.

As for the self as the producer, we have to have the confidence that we can do this. This comes in Ven. Ananda's discussion of how we need conceit in order to get past conceit. The conceit that "Other people can do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. Why can't I?": That's a good sense of self. You need that. You need to have that kind of confidence. Otherwise, you can't do the path. You may think that nibbana is off someplace else. A lot of us here think that nibbana is over in Thailand. Ajaan Fuang once told me that when he was a little kid he thought nibbana was up in the Himalayan Mountains. And you can imagine what the people in the Himalayan Mountains think: someplace else.

Actually, nibbana is something we can attain through our efforts right here. Someone once asked me, "Where's the best place to practice?" And I said, "Right where

you are." This is where things are going to be found. So you've got to have the confidence that it's here and you're capable of finding it—which is how conceit is needed on the path. You can't let go of healthy conceit right away. You have to keep believing that you're capable of this.

And then there's the self as a consumer: There's the passage where the Buddha talks about the self as a governing principle. He's got three governing principles for ways to think when you're feeling tempted to leave the path. One is the world as a governing principle: realizing that there are beings in the world who can read your mind. What are they going to think when you're getting ready to give up?

Then there's the Dhamma as a governing principle: realizing that here's an excellent Dhamma. It's very rare that we find a true Dhamma like this. So here's our chance to practice. If we don't practice now, when are we going to get another chance?

Then there's self as a governing principle, which is where you remind yourself, "I got on this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering. If I get off this path or if I stop and get lazy and lax, do I really love myself?" In this case, you're thinking about yourself as the consumer of the results of the path. It's something you want to hold in mind.

Don't be afraid of having a desire to practice. Don't be afraid of building up a self around it. I once read a book by a monk saying that concentration and effort require a strong sense of will and motivation, but motivation requires a sense of self, and we all know that Buddhism is against a sense of self, so right concentration is not to try to do concentration, and right effort is not to do any effort—which is getting everything all backwards. You use the sense of self, a healthy sense of self, until you don't need it anymore. Then you naturally drop it.

Even the beginning of wisdom starts with a question framed in terms of self: "What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" There you've got the self both as a producer and as a consumer built right into the question. What makes it wise is that you realize that there is such a thing as long-term happiness, you want long-term rather than short-term, and you realize it's going to have to depend on your actions.

So where do you try to find an answer to that question? You look at your own actions. Where are you causing suffering? Can you stop? Can you be more skillful in your actions? When you're doing concentration, it's the same sort of thing. When the mind gets settled down, is it really as still as it could be? Or is there some disturbance in here? Look around to see what you're doing that's causing the disturbance—because the acts of the mind are what's causing the disturbance.

The Buddha devotes a refrain in a sutta to the need to settle in and indulge in concentration, which means you let yourself enjoy it for a while. Don't be afraid of enjoying the concentration. Don't listen to those people who plaster warning signs all over jhana saying, "Watch out. Keep away. Dangerous." The Buddha never put warning

signs on jhana. He never cordoned it off. He said that this is something you should want to do. If you're going to be attached to the pleasure, it's better than *not* having this pleasure to be attached to—because otherwise, you're just going to go back to your old ways, attached to looking for pleasure in sensuality.

So you learn how to enjoy the pleasure of concentration but without losing your focus. This is one of the practices you do in order not to be overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. Whatever little pains there are in the body, you learn to work through them. As for the pleasure, you don't let the pleasure absorb all of your attention. When you're with the breath, you don't leave the breath. It's a matter of learning how to be with pleasure, sometimes very intense pleasure, and yet not focus on the pleasure itself. Keep your eye on the breath. Stay with the breath.

It's like that image the Buddha gives of the man walking through a crowd. He's got a bowl of oil on his head and someone following right behind him with a sword raised. If a drop of oil falls from the bowl, the man with the sword is going to cut off the guy's head. On one side, there's a beauty queen, singing and dancing. On the other side, there's a huge crowd exclaiming, "The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!" And if he lets himself get distracted by either side, he's going to die.

The same thing happens if you let your attention stray from the breath to the pleasure. It's not that *you're* going to die if you start wallowing in the pleasure; your concentration will die. You'll lose your focus, and your concentration will become less and less alert. Sometimes you'll sit here for a while in a nice hazy buzz, but when you come out, you won't have any sense of where you were. That's concentration lacking alertness. Delusion concentration.

So you learn how to be with the pleasure but not overcome by the pleasure. Then you can ask yourself, "Is this as still as it could be? Or is there something in here that's still a disturbance to the mind?" You look for that. You see what you're doing, what perception you're holding in mind. As you abandon any perceptions that create even the slightest disturbance, you go into deeper, deeper, and deeper stages of concentration. Basically, what you're doing is asking yourself the questions of the four noble truths: "Where's the suffering? Where's the stress?" In this case, it's very subtle. It's hard to call it suffering, but it is stress. It is a disturbance. When you notice it, the next questions are: "What action is causing it?" and "What can you do to let it go?"

If you keep up this process, you finally do get to something in the mind that's deeper than concentration. You can actually touch the deathless inside. And because you've gotten used to seeing how the mind fabricates states, you recognize this as something *not* fabricated. You know you didn't do it. But the fabrication of the path got you to the threshold.

After having that experience, you come out of it. And in coming out of it, that's where the fetters get cut. The very first time around, you've gained certainty. You're no

longer uncertain about what the Buddha taught. You've experienced what he taught. As he said, there really is a deathless and you found it. There's no longer any holding onto teachings about the self because however you could define a self would have to be around the five aggregates, and you've now had that experience that had nothing to do with the five aggregates at all. There's not even any desire to want to define yourself in any way, as a separate self or a connected self or a finite self or an infinite self, cosmic self, whatever: There's no desire to define yourself in any way, shape, or form.

Finally, there's no longer any clinging to precepts or habits and practices. In other words, your virtue is mastered. What does it mean not to cling to virtue? It doesn't mean you don't hold to the precepts anymore, it's just that the precepts are part of your behavior now and you don't have to build any sense of self around them. There's no fashioning of a sense of self, so you're not *"silamaya":* You're not fashioned of your precepts. In other words, you're virtuous, but there's no sense that you're better than other people because you're virtuous. You're not defining yourself in terms of your virtue.

But you're still holding onto the practice of concentration and discernment, because you've got to develop them further. That's where a lingering sense of self remains—and where it's still needed. There still has to be a little bit of conceit around these practices, otherwise they're not going to get mastered.

It's not the case that we can make up our minds, saying, "Okay, I'm going to abandon this fetter today and then work on the next fetter tomorrow." You can't plan these things in advance. Instead, as the ajaans say, you're cooking the mind.

As in Ajaan Lee's image, you're putting a piece of rock in a smelter. As the heat gets higher, the different metals in the rock begin to melt and come flowing out of the rock. First there's the tin, then there's the lead, then there's the zinc, then there's the silver, then there's the gold, as the heat gets higher and higher. You can't pick these things out of the rock with a toothpick or a scalpel. The only thing you can do is put the heat of your effort on the mind, keeping after the mind when it's causing any sense of stress or suffering or disturbance. You want to figure out what's going on. That's the heat: Ajaan Lee calls it the heat of ardency, the wisdom factor in mindfulness and concentration practice. And through that heat, the good things start showing themselves.

So the way we test the Buddha's teachings is right here in getting our mind into concentration and then asking the right questions. As for the things that get abandoned, they get abandoned based on experiences that will come when you subject the mind to the right practice.

So focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves. The path is something fabricated. It leads to something unfabricated. It doesn't cause the unfabricated, but it leads you there. Without the path, you can't get there at all. So focus on what you're doing right now. Be really sensitive to what you're doing right now

because your sensitivity is what's going to allow you to see where there's stress that you didn't notice before, along with what's coming along with the stress, what's causing it. This is discernment. Discernment is not just a matter of repeating a formula, like "inconstant, stressful, not-self." It's a matter of learning to be more and more sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. As you get more and more sensitive, things will start showing up that you didn't see before. And in that direct experience, the results will come on their own without your having to know about them beforehand.

Dispassion

May 20, 2018

There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going off to a distant land, so they go to take leave of the Buddha. He tells them to take leave of Sariputta, too. So they go to see Ven. Sariputta and he asks them, "When you go to this distant land and people ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' how are you going to answer them?" So the monks ask Sariputta, "What would be a good answer to give?" And the first answer he gives is, "Our teacher teaches dispassion: the ending of passion." Then he goes on to say, "If the people are intelligent, then they will ask, 'Dispassion for what?'" That shows a big difference right there between people in that time and people in our time. Most people now, when they hear the word "dispassion," lose interest immediately. They don't care about what you might be advocating dispassion for. The idea that dispassion would come first is something that's not all that appealing.

But for intelligent people, Sariputta says, you answer their question by saying that the Buddha teaches dispassion for the aggregates. And then the next question would be, "What advantage does your teacher see in having dispassion for the aggregates?" The answer: "When they change, you don't suffer."

It's interesting that dispassion is the first thing Ven. Sariputta mentions. The Buddha himself at one point said dispassion itself is the highest of all dhammas, of all phenomena. The noble eightfold path is the highest of all fabricated phenomena, but dispassion is unfabricated—and it's the highest experience you can have.

Here again, the idea that dispassion would be better than anything else you could know sounds very strange. But the forest ajaans talk about this a lot. They say it's like sobering up after you've been drunk. When you're drunk, you don't see things clearly. Only when you sober up do you finally free the mind from all the confusion and fogginess of being drunk. That's when you see things for what they are.

Ajaan Lee compares dispassion to eating something and finally realizing that you don't want to eat it anymore. This associates dispassion very closely with disenchantment, which is the sense that you've had enough of a certain kind of food. He said that with dispassion you spit things out. What you spit out, of course, is the five aggregates. You've been feeding on them. That's what clinging means: You've been feeding on them. And for most of us, the only pleasure we know in life is through satisfying our hungers by feeding. So the idea of going beyond feeding requires an act of the imagination to appreciate that it really could be a good thing.

But take an objective look at the nature of feeding. One, it's oppressive to the things

being fed on. Two, it's oppressive for the person who needs to feed. You've always got to be looking for new sources of food, and fighting off others who want to take the food you've got. The Buddha's not offering, as an alternative, that you've got to starve yourself, which most of us think is the only alternative to feeding. His alternative is to find a part of the mind that doesn't need to feed. Dispassion is what leads us there. It's related to the duties of all four noble truths.

As the Buddha says in his first sermon, our duty with regard to the first noble truth is to comprehend it. And then in another sutta, he answers the question, "What does it mean to comprehend?" It means to understand each clinging-aggregate to the point of dispassion. You realize that you've been feeding off of form and feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness: all these things that make up your sense of who you are. Now, though, you've found something better, which doesn't require that you need to feed anymore. And you realize that all of this clinging and holding on is suffering. So you feel dispassion for the objects you've been clinging to, and for the clinging itself.

Similarly with the second noble truth—the origination of suffering, which is any one of three types of craving: for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming. You try to develop dispassion for these cravings so that you can abandon them. The third noble truth is dispassion itself. The only truth that involves some passion is the path. You've got to have some passion to develop it. It's something you have to put together, to construct. And to construct it well, you have to want to do it well. Ardency, basically, means giving your whole heart to it. But then there does come a point where the path is complete, it's done its work, and so you have to let go of it, too. At that point, you have to develop dispassion for the path as well. Only then will you be fully free.

Think of the image of the raft. The raft stands for the path. On the way across the river, you have to hold onto it. When you get to the further shore, you have to put it aside. The putting it aside: That's dispassion.

So dispassion weaves its way throughout the teachings. This is why the Buddha said, on the night of his parinibbana, that the best way to show homage to him is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And then he said, in another sutta, "What does it mean to do that? It means to practice for the sake of dispassion." You could also interpret it as meaning not changing the Dhamma to suit yourself. You have to change yourself in order to suit the Dhamma. But both of these meanings come down to the same thing: To change yourself to fit in with the Dhamma means that you have to think about dispassion in a good way and make it your aim. As the Buddha said, if you think of nibbana, dispassion, and disenchantment as suffering, one, you're wrong, and two, it's going to be hard to practice. So learn to see these things in the right light.

And the right light, he says, is to see renunciation as rest. See renunciation as a true way of finding peace in the mind. And in renouncing, we don't give up our feeding just

by starving. We give up feeding because we find something in the mind that doesn't need to feed. This is one of the reasons why awakening happens in stages. You gain your first taste of the deathless with your first taste of awakening. It doesn't end all passion, but it does let you know that there is something better, something really good that comes with dispassion, and that there is a part of the mind that doesn't need to feed. That's basically when you're won over to the idea of dispassion, so that when the chance comes to finally let go totally, you're ready for it.

This is why practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is a factor of stream entry. It's something you work on. Try to see dispassion as something positive: as true freedom. That gives you motivation.

It's paradoxical. This passion for the path has to be motivated by seeing the value of dispassion. But again, there are a lot of paradoxes in the path: things you have to develop that you will eventually have to let go of. In this case, you develop the passion to want to grow up, to stop feeding on the things you used to feed on. When I was a child, I used to save up my money to buy Hostess cupcakes: pure garbage. And now that I see that they're pure garbage, I'm glad I'm not eating Hostess cupcakes anymore, or wasting any more money on them. You can probably think of the things you ate as a child that you would find disgusting now. Well, that's basically how awakened people feel about the things they fed on before. We still like these things because of distorted perceptions. But when you get your perceptions right, you let go with a sense of freedom and release, not with a sense of depression or deprivation.

This is one of the big misunderstandings about dispassion. There was a study done a while back about lay people in Sri Lanka who had the reputation for being really into the Dhamma. And the researchers came up with the conclusion that a lot of these people were suffering from clinical depression, believing that nothing in the world was any good, that there was no reason to want to accomplish anything at all. But that's not the kind of dispassion the Buddha's talking about. His dispassion requires a passion for the path motivated by the sense that there really is something worth putting all that effort into.

So learn to see dispassion in a good light and realize that even though it is the highest of all dhammas, there's something higher still, which is nibbana, the ending of dhammas. Ajaan Mun makes this point. He says that the third noble truth is not the final goal. It's the last step, the step that leads to nibbana. There's a duty that you have to do with regard to the third noble truth—you have to realize it—but nibbana is not something you have to do. There's no duty associated with it at all.

Dispassion is something you move toward, something for which you create the conditions in the mind. Ajaan Lee describes it as the point where finally the fabricated and the unfabricated make a total break. From that point on, the mind is beyond all dhammas, even the dhamma of dispassion. It's totally free. But dispassion is the portal that lets you go there. We need it because we've been feeding on these things for so long

and we have to learn that there's something better. And that requires that we see the feeding itself as a burden for the mind.

So try to get your views straight. When the Buddha says that the cessation of suffering is dispassion, learn to see that as a good thing. Use that perspective to give yourself some passion for the path. Ajaan Fuang used to say that if you want to get good at the meditation, you have to be crazy about it. Every little sliver of time you might find to stay with the breath, you do that. Keep at it. Keep at it. So develop passion for the goal of dispassion. And then, ultimately, you use dispassion to reach the point where the mind is beyond both.

The freedom the Buddha's talking about is that total. If we work in this direction, then we're practicing the Dhamma in line with the Buddha's intentions for why he taught the Dhamma and why he wanted people to practice it. That's how we honor his teaching. That's how we do honor to our own desire for true happiness.

Dhamma Is a Quality of the Heart

June 26, 2018

Most of us first encounter the Dhamma through words—words we've read; words we've heard—which means that we often miss the fact that Dhamma is not a quality of words. It's a quality of the heart. The Buddha discovered the Dhamma in his heart and then he put it into words to communicate it. But the actual quality of the Dhamma—the fact of the Dhamma, the actuality of the Dhamma—is something you find in the heart. So we have to remember that all the words are there to point to something in the heart. They're part of the Buddha's strategy for teaching us, and they're part of our strategy for practicing, to help direct the practice.

But not everything is nailed down in the words. In fact, the basic concepts the Buddha taught are not nailed down at all. Here we are, training the mind to find true happiness, but happiness is not a word that he defined. Mind is not a word that he defined, probably because as you go through the practice, your appreciation of happiness is going to change. Your appreciation of the mind is going to change. So it's good not to have them nailed down too tightly. Even dukkha: He defines dukkha as the five clinging-aggregates, but your understanding of what the word covers is going to change as you practice. It's going to get more refined. Things that you regard as pleasure right now: Ultimately you'll see that they have their stress. They can entail dukkha. But for the time being, as long as they seem pleasant, you stick with them because the practice is strategic. It's trying to develop a quality of truthfulness in the heart, and it does it step by step.

Truth is something that exists on many levels in the Buddha's teachings. There is the truth of statements. There is the truth of perceptions. And there's the truth of actualities. We start out with the perceptions, in other words, the labels we have in our minds. And we use true perceptions as we speak, because otherwise, what would we have to direct our practice?

We're already fabricating our experience through our perceptions, so the Buddha's giving us new perceptions to use. But notice, they're there to be used. We're not trying to arrive at a true perception. The Buddha makes this point many times in the Sutta Nipata. There are cases, he says, where you go beyond truth. In other words, you go beyond the truth of perceptions because you've arrived at the truth of an actuality: a quality of truth in the heart. And that's something that doesn't have to do with words.

Now, Buddhist scholars can lie to us. In fact, it happens again and again. They can take the words of the texts and can twist them into almost anything. But the question is, is there truthfulness in doing that?

I was reading a passage by Ajaan Funn today, talking about his early years as a monk. He'd sit up all night. He said that if he was going to fall asleep, he'd fall asleep while he was sitting. If he got tired of sitting, he'd walk. Got tired of walking, he'd go back and sit. Because, as he said, if he wasn't going to gain awakening in this lifetime, he didn't want it to be through his laziness.

There's a story in the Canon that's a cautionary tale about a member of the Sakyan clan. When he died, the Buddha said that if he had gone forth and started practicing early in life, he would have become an arahant. If he'd gone forth in the middle of his life, he would have become a non-returner, a stream enterer. In other words, he could have guaranteed that he wouldn't have to fall to lower realms. But he never got around to practicing, out of sheer laziness and heedlessness. So his opportunity was wasted. He had the potential but he wasted it. And Ajaan Funn said he didn't want that to be true of him. So he really gave himself to the practice and, because he was true, he got true results.

So the truth of the Dhamma is not something that's defined in words. The words are there as aids in the practice, to help you ask the right questions and to observe things you might not have observed otherwise. Some of the vocabulary is like the vocabulary for tasters, or those who work with very refined differences in fragrances. They have to develop a very specific, very precise vocabulary. The more precise the vocabulary, the more subtle things they notice. But the truth of the smells and flavors isn't in the words. It's in the sensitivity to actual smells and flavors. The concepts are there to help you notice things you might have missed otherwise, to help you look in areas you might have overlooked, and to ask questions that might not have occurred to you before.

We're not here to arrive at a description of the world, or a description of the mind, or a description of anything. We're not arriving at a description. We're arriving at the actuality, what the Buddha gave many different names to. This is a point that Ajaan Maha Boowa makes often. He says it doesn't really matter what name you give to nibbana. What's important is you get the actuality. The Buddha described certain aspects about it. He called it the highest happiness, but he said that it wasn't a feeling of happiness, so it doesn't fall under the aggregates. What that means, he doesn't say. He also said that it was a kind of consciousness, a consciousness without surface, outside of space and time. He never explained how that consciousness was related to the consciousness in the aggregates, but it's definitely something different.

Consciousness in the aggregates has to do with consciousness that is near or far; past, present or future. In other words, it's in time and space. Consciousness without surface is something else. But he never clarified the relationship between the two. There was a time when a monk was talking about how this consciousness is what goes from one life to the next. And the Buddha called him in and said, "Which consciousness are you talking about?" And the monk replied, "The consciousness that we have at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind." It would have been interesting if he had said

consciousness without surface, how the Buddha would have dealt with that. But consciousness at the senses, as the Buddha said, is dependently co-arisen consciousness. It's something that arises and falls away because it depends on conditions. So the monk was wrong about the consciousness he was describing, but the question of consciousness without surface never got addressed in that dialogue.

There are a lot of things the Buddha doesn't explain about nibbana, because, after all, it ultimately lies beyond explanation. As the Buddha said, it lies beyond the limits of description. A proper description of what it is, is not what gets you there. But he does explain *how* to get there, and that's the important thing for him to convey and for us to know. Getting there is something you do inside. It involves qualities you have inside the heart and mind. The problem lies inside, but the solution lies inside as well: qualities that can be immediately present to your awareness. We're not dealing in abstractions. We're not dealing in anything far away.

When my father went to Thailand the very first time, I tried to get him to meditate. His first question for Ajaan Fuang was: He was a Christian. Was that going to be an obstacle to the meditation? Ajaan Fuang said, "No. We're going to talk about the breath. The breath doesn't belong to anybody. It's not Buddhist. It's not Christian. It doesn't belong to anybody in particular. It's common property throughout the world. We talk about the breath so that we can use the breath to catch the mind. And then we can talk about the mind: in other words, your awareness right here." Whether you're Christian or Buddhist doesn't have to get involved, because the things that are happening in your awareness right now are the things that cause suffering, regardless of your background. But you can also develop qualities right here in your awareness that will put an end to suffering.

And the process of developing the skillful qualities and abandoning the unskillful ones: What's that going to do to your awareness? It's going to do something good, really good, but beyond that, you can't anticipate it. The Buddha simply reassures you that we're not committing spiritual suicide here. We're not blanking out. There is a kind of awareness that knows the goal.

But there's a lot he doesn't explain. Just the simple fact that we have freedom to choose from a range of choices in the present moment: He never explains that. Sometimes our range of choices is limited—it's not that we're totally without any restrictions—but there are areas where we do have freedom of choice. He says to take advantage of that. He doesn't explain it, but he doesn't have to. He's basically saying that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is simply what you can do.

He's interested in finding the people who see that as a really great opportunity, who look at the suffering they've had in their lives—whatever it is and however they might define it—and they've decided they've had enough. Those are the people the Buddha's talking to, the people who have the honesty to realize, "Okay, I'm suffering because of something I'm doing. But I can change the way I do things. Even if it's hard, I can do it."

I don't know how many people complain, "Well, it's easy to say, but it's hard to do." Well, yeah. It's hard to do sometimes, but it's doable. Don't let the fact that it may be hard be an obstacle.

This is where truthfulness of your character comes in. As Ajaan Lee says, "If you're true, you'll find the truth." If you're not true, then no matter how much you may know —no matter how many of the texts you may have read, all the languages you may have studied, the ability to define this term or that—you're not going to arrive at the truth, because truthfulness is a quality of the heart. The Dhamma's a quality of the heart. Nibbana—which is the ending of all dhammas, including all words and all views—is touched at the heart. So focus your attention here, at the heart. That's where all the work is going to be done, and where the solution to the problem will be found.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Anatta: Not-self.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat.*

Avijja: Ignorance of the four noble truths and the skills associated with their duties. Sanskrit form: *avidja.*

Brahma-vihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning "awake."

Chedi: A spired monument to the Buddha.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma.*

Luang Pu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahma-vihara.*

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Parinibbana: The final passing-away of a Buddha or arahant.

Sakyan: The clan into which the Buddha was born.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Satipatthana: Establishing of mindfulness. The act of being ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with any of four things in and of themselves—body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

Tathagata: One who has become authentic or has truly gone to the goal. An epithet of the Buddha.

Upasika: A female lay-follower of the Buddha.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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